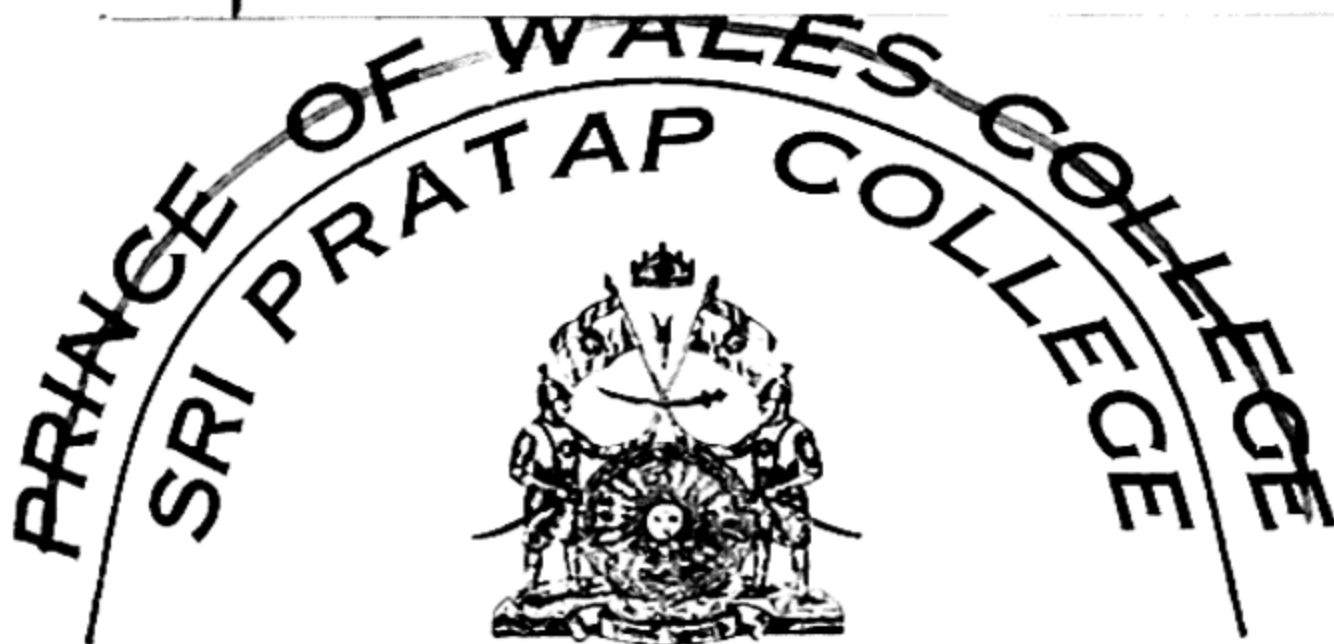


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By Du

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ne who will read this book
should try to understand
as meaning. Thank you
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read it thoroughly otherwise
you will die!

To the reader:-
This is an interesting
book in the true sense
of the word. Thank you
S. J. and
9.10.67

G. A. HENTY'S

Redskin and Cowboy

Redskin and Cowboy
Retold by

DOUGLAS V. DUFF

Author of the Jack Harding Adventure Series, &c., &c.

Douglas V. Duff

with a frontispiece by

With a Frontispiece by J. A. May

J. A. MAY

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Reviser's Preface

There can be no doubt about it, G. A. Henty sits upon a pinnacle as a writer for boys. I know that many people will think me guilty of sacrilege in making this attempt to revise the Master's work. Yet I shall not care a brass farthing for their strictures, if I can but succeed in making that grand old yarn-spinner as dear a figure to the new generation as he was to mine when we were lads.

That, and that alone, reverence and love for the man whose stories meant so much to me when I was a lad, is the motive for my attempt to make Henty again a name dear to every boy. Let that be my excuse, if any excuse is needed.

DOUGLAS V. DUFF.

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REDSKIN AND COWBOY

CHAPTER I

An Advertisement

In 1851 Cedar Gulch was a flourishing camp. A few prospectors had made good finds, and the usual gold rush had followed. Cedar Gulch was turning out better than many other places, for a good many of the miners who had rushed to file claims had been lucky. It was not like so many "lucky strikes" where the only gold ever found was that carried away by the prospectors who first found the place.

Hundreds of men were working like ants on the flat land beside the stream, in the gravel that was part of the river-bed during the winter. Now, in summer, the stream was a mere trickle, hardly sufficient for the washing of the soil and gravel which was being taken from the shafts where the miners sweated and toiled. Everywhere were piles of stones and rubbish brought up from the pits; men toiled at windlasses, while others emptied the filled buckets as they were heaved up into swinging troughs and cradles; others kept these filled with water from the stream, and swung

and rocked them with an easy, regular motion that sent the pebbles and larger refuse swirling to the top. The mud ran out of the lower end, until, at last, there was nothing but a few shining grains of yellow gold, or, maybe, a tiny nugget left in the cradle.

Men who had not been lucky enough to arrive in Cedar Gulch in time to stake out a claim in the valuable river-flat moved about amongst the piles at the shaft-heads, watching the work with eager eyes. They looked keenly at the yields of precious yellow metal in the cradles, as many of them were anxious to buy any claim that showed signs of "panning-out rich". One of the mines that was doing best was owned by three partners, English Bill, Sim Howlett and Limping Frank, who had been amongst the first prospectors to arrive in the Gulch.

They had been partners for over two years; Sim, a square-built, powerful fellow, one of the earliest of the California miners, was the leader. He was a quiet, easy-spoken man, but he was one of those silent, deadly fighters, slow to anger, with whom even the worst gunman in the roaring gold-camps was slow to pick a quarrel. English Bill, on the other hand, was a tall, wiry fellow with a hot temper, but a general favourite in spite of it. He was generous with his money, always ready to give a helping hand to anyone who was down on his luck, and a capital worker at the heavy labour in the shaft. Limping Frank was the exact opposite of his two partners. He was at least

ten years older than either of them; his hair was white, and his face was as kind and gentle as a woman's. He was very small and slight and walked with a dragging limp, the result of a bullet-wound, and he certainly looked quite unfit for the heavy toil of the diggings. Yet there were men in Cedar Gulch, who had known the three partners in other camps, who said that they would rather quarrel with Sim and English Bill together, than with Limping Frank alone. As some of them were noted pistol-shots and gun-fighters their report was quite enough to win respect for the frail, little limping man who would otherwise have met with nothing but pity, ill-usage and contempt.

Frank did very little of the hard work of mining. He cooked, looked after their shack, and did the washing and mending of his partners' clothing, only occasionally coming down to help with the cradle. Because he was always ready to help in nursing the miners through their bouts of fever, or in extracting bullets and sewing up bowie-knife wounds, Frank was known as the "Doctor", and there were a good many men in the Gulch who swore that they owed him their lives. A ranting stranger who arrived one day demanded to be told why he should not pick a quarrel with the Doctor. ✕

"Say, stranger," drawled the man who had warned him, "that little atomy of a man, as you calls him, could put a .44 bullet slap between your eyes ten

times running at fifty feet. There ain't no better shot, nor one quicker on the draw, on the whole Pacific Slope."

"He certainly doesn't look like it," the stranger replied.

"No, I guess he doesn't," agreed the other, "and what's more he says nothing either, though you'll find his mates speaking up quick enough if anyone tries to bully him. No, there's nothing quarrelsome about the Doctor, he's all for peace and order—but, if anyone tries to break that quietness, the Doctor just sets himself up as police, judge, and executioner all in one. I've seen him do it once or twice. When a man gets too bad to be allowed to live and starts shooting over and above what's fair and right, especially if he starts becoming a terror to decent men, then Limping Frank comes out.

"Let me tell you what he done down at Dead Man's Gulch where a gang of four gunmen had become the terror of the place. They killed seven or eight harmless fellows between them, before Texan Jack, the leader and the worst of the bunch, one day shot down a youngster who had just come into camp, without giving the lad a chance and for no reason at all, except sheer poisonous badness. Five minutes later Limping Frank came into the saloon and walked straight up to where Texan Jack was standing drinking and laughing with two of his gang. Believe me, stranger, you'd never have known the Doctor if you'd seen him then;

there was none of that gentle, woman's look about him. His eyes were wide open and there was a set grin on his face that I knew meant mischief. Limping Frank stepped into the middle of the room, and then spat out in a high, clear voice that brought silence on the whole saloon:

“ ‘We've had more than enough of you, Texan Jack,’ he said. ‘Now's your time to draw.’

“Texan Jack goggled with astonishment at the little fellow.

“ ‘Are you mad, runt?’ he asked.

“ ‘Draw, or I'll let you have it as you stand,’ the Doctor said, his voice deadly quiet, and Texan Jack saw that he meant mischief. The Doctor had no pistol in his hand, and the Texan thought that he had him beat. He shook a gun out of his sleeve, but he was no way quick enough. The Doctor drew like lightning, and though he got a bullet through his shoulder, Texan Jack went down with a lead pill in his brain, shot between the eyes. The Texan's two mates drew at once, but two more shots from the Doctor's gun left them corpses on top of their dead leader. You should have seen him, as he holstered his smoking pistol, and turned to us in the crowd.

“ ‘I dislike this sort of thing,’ he said, as quiet as a judge. ‘Will some of you tell the rest of the gang to go away before I am compelled to deal with them?’ Half an hour later I saw the Doctor, with his arm in a sling, cooking his mates' dinner.

"There was another case if you would care to hear about it; a woman was murdered by a Mexican half-breed. It was a shocking crime, and her husband went off his head. Well, none of us really know what happened, except that the Doctor left camp, was missing two months, and then came back with the jewellery and trinkets which had been stolen from the dead woman. Once, in another camp, we made him Judge, and that was the most peaceful gold-camp that ever was in California. No, stranger, take it from me, it's just plain suicide to get that little man's dander up."

Down in the shack the three partners had finished work for the day, and were sitting down to the supper of tea, steak and corn-cakes which the Doctor had made ready for them.

"We'll have to be moving pretty soon," said English Bill. "Another week will see the claim just about worked out. Well, we've not done too badly out of it. Shall we buy someone else's shaft, or start off for somewhere fresh?"

"I vote for a shift," said Sim, his mouth full of steak. "This claim's panned out well, but it's been as dull as ditchwater here in Cedar Gulch; the gold lies so evenly that it's been like working for wages; you can tell every evening just how much you will find in the cradle. I'm all for a little excitement—nothing one day, and eight or ten ounces the next."

"It comes to the same thing in the long run," grunted the Englishman, "we never get very much

forrarder. By the time we've paid for our grub there's never very much left. We're a pack of fools; we work hard, and I chuck my money away at the gambling-tables; you, Sim, have a monthly burst and spend every cent you have, while the Doctor goes broke on buying soups and meats for his sick."

"What else can I do?" the Doctor asked. "I can't see people dying for want of ordinary necessities. You two don't want to save money, because you think that you are strong enough to go on earning for years yet. If you had a hundred thousand dollars you'd chuck it away in six months."

"Guess that you're right, Frank," said Sim. "Say, what's that?" as three pistol-shots crashed out in the evening air.

"It's up in the saloon," said the Doctor quietly. "I shall have to see about things. This camp is getting too full of gunmen. It's about due for a clean-up."

"Go easy, old man," said Sim anxiously; "after all, you can't expect a mining-camp to be a paradise, you know."

"I don't like Symonds, the gambler," the Doctor said gently.

"A bad egg," agreed Sim, "but he's leaving Cedar Gulch. I heard yesterday that he's going down to 'Frisco at the end of the week—if he doesn't, Bill and I will form a committee and invite Symonds to take the air."

"I'll be glad when he's gone," said the Doctor.

"Now let's get back to what we were discussing. Are we to buy in another claim or shall we make tracks away from here?"

"If we move on where shall we go, Sim?" asked Bill.

"I heard tell about a new place called Gold Run. What about a month's prospecting up at the head of the Yuba? All this gold must be washed down from somewhere, and nobody's ever seemed to have found the place from which it comes."

"I'm game to go anywhere with you chaps," said the Doctor, "but, if you think that you're going to find the spot from which all this placer gold started, by travelling to the sources of the Yuba, you're making a mighty big blunder."

He launched into a long explanation showing them how the erosion of the rocks during millions of years, assisted by the flow of the river, made it almost impossible that they could ever strike a lode of gold in the higher mountains. The other two listened to him in attentive silence, and, when he had finished, Sim said:

"I guess that you're right, Doctor. So we won't try prospecting in the hills, though there have been some nice little finds made up there in spite of what you say. I vote we don't decide anything until we've finished up our claim; then we can have a look round and see what's doing. Anything can happen in a week; there may be a new rush somewhere else, and

we shall be ready to start at once if we don't tie ourselves down. Hullo, there's the horn! The mail from Sacramento's in. I'll slip down and see if I can get hold of a newspaper. All the new strikes will be listed," and he strolled away to the saloon.

In a quarter of an hour he was back with a paper, and threw it to Bill to read out news. If one believed all that was in it it would have seemed that every miner on the Pacific Slope was making a fortune, but the three partners knew that most of the yarns were put in by storekeepers, anxious to start a "rush" to their districts, so that they could make fortunes selling goods to greenhorns, fools enough to believe what they read. All three grinned widely at the stories about Cedar Gulch; the camp was not doing so badly, but according to the paper everyone there was making his fortune.

Bill threw the paper aside at last, and lay on his blankets beside Sim, while the Doctor squatted down beside the solitary candle and read it through, right down to the advertisements. Suddenly he gave a startled grunt and looked up.

"Bill," he said. "Isn't your name Tunstall?"

The Englishman let his pipe fall in his astonishment. A man's name was very seldom mentioned in those early days in the Californian goldfields.

"It is," he said. "What about it?"

"There's an advertisement here that looks as though it may refer to you."

"Well, what is it? I've not been shooting sheriffs or rustling stock, so why on earth are they advertising for me?" Bill demanded.

"Listen," read out the Doctor. "Five hundred dollars reward will be paid by James Campbell, attorney, San Francisco, to anyone who will give him information as to the whereabouts of William Tunstall, who was last heard of four years ago in California. The said William Tunstall is entitled to property in England under the will of his brother, the late Edgar Tunstall of Byrneside, Cumberland."

"So poor old Edgar's gone, is he," said Bill sadly.

Sim Howlett had roused himself at the news. "Congratulations, Bill," he said, "though I'm sorry about your brother."

"I wish that I had gone to see the dear chap," Bill said sadly, "but I never thought that he would die before me."

"I don't want to pry into your private affairs, Bill," said the Doctor, "but I remember you saying, Christmas Day before last, that there was a home for you in England if you wanted to go back there and settle down."

"It's just the old yarn of a father and son who could not get on together," said Bill. "I was the elder son, and my father was one of the largest land-owners in Cumberland. He was a very hard man, and when I was eighteen we had a terrible row. I dare say he was in the right, but I was pretty headstrong

myself, and in the end he turned me out and told me not to come home again. I tramped to Liverpool and sailed in the first sailing-ship for America. Ten years later my father died, and everything was left to my younger brother, Edgar. Edgar and I were always friends, and he wrote offering me a half-share in everything, but I would have none of it, I expect that I was too thickheadedly proud. We exchanged several letters, but I was just as obstinate as my father had been. Anyhow, I had one or two letters which I was too lazy to answer, and now poor Edgar is dead, and it seems as though he had left me some property. Of course I was a fool, and an obstinate, ungrateful fool, but a man never sees that sort of thing until it is too late."

The others kept silence for a while.

"I think you'd better go down to 'Frisco and see that lawyer," the Doctor said at last.

"I suppose I must," Bill agreed lazily, "but there's no hurry for a day or so."

No further mention of the matter was made until a week later when they had finished up the last gold in their claim; that evening, Bill said:

"I don't want this money. If I settled down in England I should feel like a fish out of water, be perfectly miserable. I reckon that I'll buy a snug little place in the foothills and put a manager in to run it until I get too old for mining, and then all three of us can settle down in comfort. I'll go down to

'Frisco and see this attorney person. I'll be back inside a week, and if, in the meantime, you fellows hear of a likely place, just leave a note with the storekeeper, and I'll know where to follow you."

"I expect that you'll find us still here, Bill," said Sim. The next morning they watched him stride away up the gulch to catch the Sacramento stage that would take him down to San Francisco.

CHAPTER II

Terrible News

Bill returned to Cedar Gulch on the very day that his partners expected him. Having finished everything to do with the claim, they had no work on hand and strolled up the hill to meet the stage-coach on the chance of his being on it. When Bill leaped down the first thing he said was that he had finished with all lawyers and their questions.

"I showed him the letters from Edgar, but he sniffed down his nose, asked me for further proof, and then said that I must go to England to push my claims. I told him where he could go," Bill ended with a grin, "and then I'm afraid that I made rather a night of it. The lawyer was round at my hotel in the morning. He had the insufferable cheek to tell me not to be hasty, and we had another row. He left saying that he was going to write to England, mentioning that I had called, but that I had refused to make the voyage home or to take any further steps to establish my identity. After that he left with a rush before I could get my hands on him." Again Bill grinned. "Now, what's the news? Any fresh rush?"

"Nary a one," said Sim. "The Doctor and I think the best thing to do will be to buy the claim that's being worked by the Halkett partnership. That gang are always falling out between themselves, and they'll sell if they got an offer of a hundred ounces down. They are only getting about six ounces a day, but they are not halfway down as yet, and it might be worth while buying in."

The Doctor pointed out that the sale of their own claim left them with one hundred and nine ounces to share, so that if they bought the Halkett claim they would still have nine ounces left. At dinner-time that night they closed the deal, and the following morning started work on the badly-dug, dangerous shaft left to them by their predecessors. It took them, and a hired labourer, a whole week before the shaft was really safe for further working, but on the eighth day they washed their first gold from the new claim.

The advertisement in the paper had been seen by several men in the camp, where English Bill's luck had become the main topic of conversation. They saw him start for 'Frisco; and several of them tried to question Sim and the Doctor, but received very little information. The Gulch, after all the wild yarns, was very disappointed when Bill came back still dressed in his usual red shirt, high boots and miner's hat, and returned to work as though nothing had happened. They seemed to think that if he ever did come back it would be in a tall

hat, frock coat and patent-leather shoes, to stand champagne to the whole camp. When they questioned Bill himself, he laughed the thing off by saying that the so-called fortune was not worth talking about, and that he was certainly not going to England to claim it.

Symonds the gambler, who ran the gaming-table in the saloon, was the only person to whom he really told anything about the fortune waiting for him. Unfortunately, Bill's one great fault was that he spent far too much of his spare time at this table, and threw away in gambling every spare cent he earned. He had struck up a friendship with Symonds, a man no worse than many others of his kind who made a living out of the miners. A man had to possess nerves of steel to be a professional gambler in those days of the Gold Rush, for pistols were often drawn by angry losers, flushed with drink and excitement, and the man who played professionally carried his life in his hands. The shout "Cheat!" was a sure prelude to pistol shots across the table, and the carrying away of a body before play started again.

Symonds was not unpopular amongst the miners. He was liberal with his money, and he was known to have often spared the life of a man who had forfeited it by firing at him. He had often set broken men on their feet again, and if there was a subscription raised for some man down with fever, or for some woman whose husband had been killed in a shaft, Symonds headed the list. Still there were very few men who were

feared more than he was. He might be kindness itself on some occasions, but there was no one who could make a quicker draw of his pistol or was a surer shot, so that in nine cases out of ten it was his gun which spoke first. He was a dangerous man, but he saved himself by keeping the camps where he rested clear of other dangerous men. So he was tolerated.

Bill knew that Symonds was as dependable as a rattlesnake, and had no doubt that he would cheat at the gaming-tables if he could, but as Bill never drank when he gambled, and was never out of temper when he lost, he was not afraid. Symonds was always civil and pleasant with him, probably recognizing something in the Englishman which the others did not possess. The gambler met Bill a couple of days after his return from seeing the attorney.

"What's all this I'm hearing about you, Bill?" he asked jovially.

"A lot of rubbish about a fortune I'm supposed to have inherited," Bill replied, and started to tell him about what had happened.

"Come and try a glass of champagne," Symonds invited. "You and I have a lot in common. If I'd not been a strong-willed fool when I was a youngster, I might have been master of a large estate myself."

When Bill refused the drink, Symonds put his hand on his shoulder, saying: "Just as you like, my dear fellow. And by the way, it's a mighty expensive run home to England; if you are short of funds just

let me know, and I'll do whatever I can to help you. If you want a thousand dollars at any time tell me, and I'll be glad to let you have it."

"Thanks, Symonds," said Bill astonished. "It's mighty good of you. If I do decide to go home, I've enough to take me, but I'm very much obliged for your offer all the same."

"It's only business, you know," said Symonds affably. "I should charge you interest, so there are no thanks due. See you later."

As Symonds went on his way, Bill looked after him wondering why on earth the gambler should suddenly be so generous. He was more puzzled, in the days that followed, when on several occasions Symonds brought up the question of Bill's inheritance. One evening when there was no play in the saloon, Symonds asked him to come in and have a talk with him in his private room in the hotel. For a while they chatted on different subjects, but before long the subject came round to the legacy.

"Do you know, Bill," he said, "I've been thinking over what you said about not going home and claiming what is yours, and I think that you're wrong, if you don't mind my saying so? What have you got to look forward to out here? In another ten years you will be sorry that you let this chance slip. Of course, it's different with me. So far as money goes I could retire now, but I cannot go back to civilization again. Men don't take to my sort of life unless they've a

pretty bad record behind them, but I'll have to give up soon or I shall be wiped out in some quarrel with a drunken loser. I'm thinking of settling down in South America or some place of that sort, where I'll buy an estate and set up as a rich and virtuous Englishman whose own climate doesn't agree with him," and he laughed bitterly.

Then he carelessly changed the subject, but he came back to it again on three or four occasions during the evening, and before Bill left Symonds had a pretty good idea of the value of the Cumberland property, and the share of it that the heir was likely to get.

The new claim turned out very well, improving as the partners dug deeper into the river gravel. Four months after Bill had returned from 'Frisco, he received a bulky letter from the lawyer. It contained an abstract of his brother's will, leaving him half the property, and there was enclosed a copy of a letter written by Edgar a few days before his death. It ran:

MY DEAR WILL,

You have wandered about long enough. It is high time for you to come back to the old place that you ought never to have left.

I have left you half the estate, and it makes me happy to think that you will come back to it again. I have appointed you the guardian of my boy, who is twelve years old, and I want you to be a father to him. I hope that you will come home, both for the

boy's sake, for his mother is dead, as well as for your own. This is my last request, and I hope and pray that you will grant it.

You were always good to me when we were boys together, and I feel sure that you will fill my place with Hugh. God bless you, old fellow,

Your affectionate brother,

EDGAR.

With these papers there was a letter from Bill's family solicitors saying that they had heard from the San Francisco attorney, and begging him to come home at once.

"I think I'll have to go, boys," Bill told his partners, after reading his brother's letter. "After all, Edgar has made me guardian of the youngster, and I can't betray his trust. I'll be back in six months, after I've had another guardian appointed. I'll take no more than one thousand pounds of this legacy and hang the rest, for wouldn't I cut a fine figure as a great landlord? When this lad reaches seventeen or eighteen, I'll go back and take him on his travels, for then a staunch friend might be useful to him. However, that is all the future, I'll just be gone for a few months and then you'll see me back here."

He continued working until the end of the week, and then the Doctor cast up accounts, and the three partners shared out the gold they had taken from their new shaft. Each share came to close on £250,

so that Bill had no need to worry about means to take him to England.

That afternoon he went round the camp making his farewells, and when he awoke the next morning he had only the foggiest idea of what had happened during the previous evening. He could dimly remember having been in Symonds' private room at the hotel where he seemed to have done a lot of talking about his trip to England. The Doctor hauled him from his bunk.

"You'd better get a jerk on, Bill," he said, "if you mean to catch the Sacramento stage-coach this morning."

A bucket of cold water worked wonders. The Doctor's breakfast set Bill on his feet, and an hour later, cheered by most of the miners in camp, he started off, shouting back to Sim and the Doctor to look for him in six months' time.

Three days later, as Sim and the Doctor were breakfasting in their shack, talking over their future plans, a miner put his head through the door.

"English Bill was your pardner, warn't he?" he asked.

"He certainly is," said Sim.

"He was, you mean," said the miner grimly. "I saw his body two days ago in a Sacramento side-street, just as I was getting on to the stage. He hadn't been killed fair, neither; some skunk'd drove a bullet into the back of his head."

Sim and the Doctor were on their feet with their eyes blazing.

"Who done it?" demanded Sim.

The miner shrugged his shoulders. "The jury said it was murder agin some person or persons unknown," he answered.

The Doctor thrust his pistol into his holster, and pushed his poke of gold-dust into his belt.

"Come on, Sim," he said, very, very quietly. "We're moving."

"Where to?" gasped Sim.

"Sacramento, of course," answered the Doctor, "And we're not resting until we find Bill's murderers."

In that town they began to follow Bill's trail. They found first the hotel where he had put up for the night. After dinner it seemed, he had gone out, and had not returned. The hotel-keeper thought that he had gone away suddenly, and as the value of the kit he had left behind was enough to cover his account, no inquiries had been made. At the bank the partners learned that Bill had drawn out his share of the gold on the order which had been signed by all of them. At another hotel they discovered that Bill had spent the evening with a well-dressed stranger whom everyone thought had come from San Francisco. A German waiter described the stranger, and as soon as they were out into the street again, the Doctor grasped Sim's arm.

"We've got a clue at last," he said.

"Can't see it," grunted Sim.

"D'you mind going back to Cedar Gulch to-night?"

"Of course not," said Sim, "but what's the idea?"

"See if Symonds the gambler is still there, and if he's not, find out what time he left," grated the Doctor.

"Good Heavens, man," gasped Sim, "you don't suspect him, do you?"

"It's not mere suspicion," said the Doctor quietly. "I know just as sure as though I'd seen him shoot Bill. The description fits him exactly. At any rate, I want you to go and see."

Sim returned to Sacramento a couple of days later with the news that Symonds had left Cedar Gulch a couple of hours after Bill Tunstall. He had told everyone that he had received an urgent letter from 'Frisco, and had to get off without a moment's delay. He had gone and had not been seen again in Cedar Gulch.

"That settles it, Sim," said the Doctor. "Symonds murdered Bill. Wherever, and whenever we find him, either of us, we will kill him for the rattlesnake he is. We will separate and go hunting for him. If you are lucky and find him, you must let me know. If I am fortunate, I will send you word."

So it was settled, and the partnership broke up, the surviving two leaving on their mission to avenge the brutal slaying of their chum.

CHAPTER III

The Wanderer's Return

William Tunstall's return to his old home in Cumberland caused very little comment. After all, he had been away for nearly twenty years, and practically everybody had forgotten him. Beyond a feeling that justice had at last been done to the eldest son who had quarrelled with his father, his appearance caused no excitement. Messrs. Randolph & Son, the family solicitors and agents, reported well of him. They seemed surprised that the long years he had spent roughing it in the States had not coarsened him, and they were completely charmed with his wife, who seemed to be some sort of foreigner, a Spaniard or a Mexican.

The Randolphs, father and son, were rather old-fashioned in their business ways, and were full of apologies for all the difficulties their agent in San Francisco had raised. After all, Mr. Tunstall had presented himself as soon as he was advertised for; he had produced his brother's letters, and had offered to bring forward witnesses who had known him for years as William Tunstall. What more proof could be desired? They were quite satisfied as to his identity,

and were very warm in their welcome to the returning heir, after their first interview with him had removed all their doubts.

Mrs. Tunstall took up residence at once at Byrneside, but Mr. Tunstall did not appear for some considerable time. He visited Rugby to see Hugh, his nephew, who had been placed there a couple of months after his father's death. The boy was overjoyed when his uncle told him that he would spend the next holidays travelling on the Continent with himself and his new aunt, instead of having them at Byrneside.

Hugh was delighted with his uncle, though he did not take very greatly to his aunt, and thoroughly enjoyed touring with them in Italy and Switzerland. During the time his uncle often spoke of his own boyhood at Byrneside, and he would listen intently to Hugh's yarns of what his father had told him of how he and Uncle Will had enjoyed themselves in the old days. Hugh spoke about the pool where his father had said that he and his brother had fished as boys with old Harry Gowan the fisherman, who used to take them out in the boat. Hugh asked him if he remembered the time when the storm suddenly broke and the boat was wrecked on the island, and they and Harry Gowan were nearly drowned. William Tunstall was very glad to hear that old Gowan was still alive; and that James Wilson, who had been under-stableman and had looked after their ponies, was now coachman; that Sam, the gardener's boy, who once

showed them where to find birds' nests, was now head gardener; that Mr. Holbeach the Vicar was still alive, and his sister, Miss Elizabeth also. Hugh was delighted when he found that his uncle remembered all the people who had been at Byrneside when he was a boy—together it was a glorious holiday.

His uncle and aunt travelled as far as Rugby with him, and then went straight on to Byrneside. Hardly was William inside the big old house, than he sent for James the coachman and greeted him with the greatest heartiness.

"I should hardly have known you, James," he said, "and I expect that you would hardly have recognized me, would you?"

"That I shouldn't sir," answered James. "You were only a slip of a lad when I last saw you. Twenty years make a lot of difference."

"They certainly do, Jim," his master agreed. "D'you remember that day when we were ratting; the time when the big stack was pulled down? I'll never forget the way you roared when that old grey rat got you by the ear."

James raised a gnarled old hand to his ear, as though he still felt the pain, and grinned at the memory.

"D'ye remember how my poor brother and I dressed up in sheets one night and nearly scared you out of your wits, James? D'you still believe in ghosts?"

"Aye, I remember," James answered. "That wasn't a fair joke, that wasn't."

"No," agreed William, "it certainly wasn't. Well, James, I'm very glad to find you still here, and I hope that you will continue in my employment for many years. I hear that Sam is still about the place, and I think that I'll go along and see him."

One after another William spoke with the old servants, bringing back memories of the days when his father was alive, and thoroughly winning his way into their hearts. At dinner he dismissed the butler, and when the dining-room was empty turned to his wife, speaking Spanish.

"Well, Lola," he said, "everything seems to be turning out all right, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she answered, "I suppose that it is, but all this English stiffness is very oppressive. I wish that we were back in California again."

"Are you never going to be satisfied?" he growled savagely. "Over there you were always grumbling, and now that you have everything that a person could want you are still dissatisfied. A grand house, carriages, horses, gardens and servants, what more can you want?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose that I'll get used to it in time," she said, "but I don't like all this stiffness and coldness. I'd rather have a little hacienda down on the Del Norte, with a hammock to swing in, and a horse on which I could take a scamper whenever I felt like it."

As a result the conservatory was cleared out, its

walls painted to look like Californian scenery, and a hammock was slung for her in the warm atmosphere of the glass house. In time she began to settle down to her new life, but she never liked it, and neither the servants nor her neighbours ever cared much for her.

When Hugh came home for the Christmas holidays he was astonished to find his aunt swinging in a hammock in a conservatory filled with semi-tropical plants and made to look like a part of Southern California. Lazily she pointed out to him the strange shrubs and flowers and showed him the uses to which her countrymen put the different fruits and shrubs. As the days passed Hugh found himself getting over his first dislike of her. She was always kind and pleasant to him, while his uncle's temper grew more and more uncertain. One day when he was in a good mood he offered to instruct Hugh in the mysteries of pistol-shooting, but nothing was actually done about it until some months later. The summer holidays the lad spent with his aunt at different seaside places in Devon and Cornwall, and there had a thoroughly good time sailing and riding, so that he was extremely sorry when the day came round for his return to Rugby.

Two years passed in this fashion, Hugh spending his holidays with his people, though he saw little of his uncle who was spending more and more of his time away from home. Hugh was now turned fifteen, and he was very anxious to try the half-trained horses with which his uncle had filled the stables. Old James

the coachman, however, would not allow him to ride beyond the big meadow. His aunt became very frightened when she saw the dangerous brutes which her husband had selected for Hugh, and made him promise that he would take the old groom's advice. In the meadow he would at least fall lightly if he took a toss. One Christmas, on his return from Rugby, he found his uncle at home, and in an unusually good humour. A stiff frost had set in which had made the ground as hard as iron.

"I hear that you're beginning to be quite a horse-man," said his uncle on the second morning of the holidays. "I'm mighty glad to hear it. In the Western States every man is a first-class rider; I'll put you up to a few of our cowboy tricks if you like."

Hugh was delighted, and felt annoyed when his aunt said that he had better stick to his own English form of riding. When the lad left the room, William Tunstall turned savagely upon Lola.

"What d'you mean by interfering," he snarled. "You mind your own business, or you might find yourself running your head into trouble."

Her black eyes narrowed. "I know your game," she said, "and let me tell you that I'm not standing for it. If Hugh dies you will inherit his half of the estate. Now let me tell you that I won't have that boy hurt. I believe that you only bought these unbroken brutes because you hoped that he'd break his neck. They haven't, but it's no thanks to you. Now

you've opened up again this question of teaching him pistol-shooting. It's mighty easy to stage an accident, isn't it? Let me give you fair warning—if anything happens to that boy I'll go straight to a magistrate and tell him who you really are, and he'll mighty soon find out whether it has been an accident or something else."

White with fury he stepped up to her. "Have you gone mad? Do you know what you're risking?"

She faced him fearlessly, with a little smile on her lips.

"That will do!" she said. "I'm quite safe from you, friend husband. I know you too well. I have left a letter with my lawyers—not yours, by the way—with instructions that it is to be opened on my death, whether that death seems accidental or natural. The moment I'm dead that letter will be opened, and the whole truth about you will be made known. Do you think that I would trust myself in your hands without taking precautions? Now you know that if anything happens to me it is you who will suffer. And if you cause Hugh's death I shall tell the truth, so let's say no more about this business but each carry on in our own way."

With that she quitted the room, leaving her husband speechless in his baffled rage. Half an hour later his dog-cart was at the door, and he drove furiously away to catch the London train.

CHAPTER IV

An Explosion

Hugh was astonished when he returned from his walk to find that his uncle had gone away so suddenly.

"I thought that he meant to stay at home over the Christmas holidays?" he said. "He promised to make a start in teaching me pistol-shooting."

"Your uncle often changes his mind suddenly," his aunt replied. "Look here, Hugh, Mexican women are all good at pistol practice, and I'll teach you myself, if you like. Of course, I'm not nearly so good a shot as he is, but I can put you on the right lines, and after that it is merely a matter of constant practice. There are two or three revolvers upstairs and plenty of ammunition, and we can make a start in the conservatory where there's any amount of room. Go out and ask James to give you some thick planks, five or six of them, to set up behind a target. If he can produce such a thing as an iron plate it will be all the better."

An hour later the sharp reports of a revolver rang out in the conservatory, and from that time to the end of the holidays, Hugh practised for two or three hours every day. At first he found the heavy recoil

of the pistol made it very difficult for him to shoot accurately, but he became accustomed to this, and in a fortnight, having a very good eye, he could hit the bull's-eye nearly every time. After the first day his aunt laid aside her pistol, and, reclining in her favourite hammock, watched his progress.

At the end of a fortnight, when she saw how well he was shaping as a revolver-shot, she told him to learn practising swift draws of his weapon from its holster. Hugh would stand with his back to the target, whirl as quickly as he could, drawing his revolver and firing on the instant. When he had become fairly good at this she started him firing from the hip, telling him that in the West there was often no time to raise the gun to shoulder-level before pulling the trigger. Hugh would laugh, and say that he never intended to go out West, but that he would certainly like to be able to draw and shoot as fast as she said the Americans did.

So, to the end of the holidays, the revolver practice went steadily on, Hugh making a habit of firing seventy or eighty rounds a day. By the time he was due to return to Rugby, Hugh considered himself a very fair shot, and prided himself too on being "quick on the draw", though his aunt told him that he had a long way to go before he could come up to even an average Westerner.

During these years Mr. Tunstall's un-English ways had made him more and more disliked by his neigh-

bours. The solicitors with whom Lola had left her sealed letter, while willing to act for her, had no high opinion of her husband, though they had no faintest suspicion that he was anything but the brother of dead Edgar. When Mr. Tunstall called one day at their office and told them a flagrant lie to try and get hold of the letter, old Mr. Randolph grew very anxious, especially as the new squire had been losing a lot of money in betting, and had actually tried to raise a mortgage on Byrneside. He told his partner that he was very glad that Hugh's father had made the firm trustees for the boy, so that, whatever happened, that share of the estate was perfectly safe.

Hugh did not see his uncle again until the summer holidays. He was not at home when he arrived from Rugby, and Hugh asked his aunt if Mr. Tunstall was not expected soon.

"I never know when to expect him," she answered, quietly.

"I think that it's a rotten shame the way he leaves you alone so much!" Hugh exclaimed, full of indignation.

"I'm used to it by this time, Hugh; in fact, I'd rather he was away while you are at home, Hugh, because you two don't seem to hit it off very well together, do you?"

"Well, I do my best to keep out of any rows, Aunt."

"I know you do, Hugh, but all the same you have fearful squabbles, and they upset me terribly.

You are both so passionate and pig-headed that I think it's a great deal better if you are apart. I'd rather have you to myself; when you are at home I really enjoy myself with our rides and drives, and I simply love to see how expert you are getting as a shot. It is a fine change for me, for when you are away at Rugby I hardly ever go beyond the gardens."

Hugh quite believed her, for it was common talk that his uncle and aunt had constant quarrels whenever they were together. One servant told Hugh that all in the house would be glad when he came of age and that they hoped the old times would return, and that things would be as they had been in his father's time.

"You've got another three years to wait for that," Hugh answered. "I'm only eighteen now, but when I'm twenty-one I do mean to settle down here and run things in the old way. But I must see a bit of the world first."

The old servant hoped that Hugh would not be bringing a foreign wife back with him. "Not but what the mistress ain't a lady, and we're all very proud to serve her, but she don't drive about and make herself a figure in the county like the Mistress of Byrneside ought to do. No, Mr. Hugh, the mistress is a wonderful nice lady, but you take my advice and give us an English lady when the time comes." Hugh laughed and told him that there was plenty of time to think about that.

The next time Hugh came home he was pleasantly surprised to find a great change in his uncle's manner towards him. Things, for a day or two, went happily and smoothly. His uncle made a great effort to be friendly, and one day asked him to what university he wished to go after he left Rugby. Hugh said that he saw no sense in wasting three years at a university, when he had no intention of entering any of the professions, and that he would rather spend the time in foreign travel, an idea which his uncle warmly encouraged.

"There's nothing like travel to broaden your mind, my boy," he said. "Take my advice, don't just stick to the cities and great towns. Take a year to move around Europe and then strike out on a line of your own. See Asia and Africa, where there's a spice of adventure to give you something to remember when you settle down at last."

"That's just what I want," answered Hugh enthusiastically," and looking across at his aunt for approval, was surprised to see the strange glance she was giving her husband. She was staring at him under half-lowered lids, as though she were catching him out in something underhand. "What do you think about it, Aunt Lola?"

"I don't quite know what to think," she replied. "There's a lot to be said both ways. Anyhow, you have another year and a half at Rugby before we need discuss it."

There had been a sharp frost for days, and Hugh enjoyed himself out skating. One afternoon, on his return, he was passing the drawing-room, when he heard his uncle's voice raised in anger. The tones were so furious that he paused to listen, but he could not understand a word as his uncle was speaking in Spanish. There was a silence for a moment; then he heard what sounded like a curse, followed by a low cry and the sound of a heavy fall. Hugh rushed into the room and saw his aunt stretched upon the hearth-rug with his uncle standing over her, a devilish look upon his face and his fist clenched.

"You rotten coward!" Hugh shouted, and flung himself forward in a headlong attack upon his uncle. For a moment he drove the other back, but soon the man's vastly superior strength told. Hugh was flung off, and his opponent followed up his advantage with a crashing uppercut that sent the boy reeling. Hugh completely losing control of his temper, recovered his balance as he staggered into the fire-place, and grasping the nearest weapon, which happened to be the poker, dashed again to the attack.

His uncle's hand streaked like a flash of lightning to his hip pocket, and appeared instantaneously grasping a heavy pistol. Hugh never paused; he knew that in his uncle's state of towering rage it was either his own life or Tunstall's, and he struck blindly with the poker. The pistol went off with a roar, but the bullet cracked harmlessly into the ceiling, as the poker struck

home. The man went down like a sack of corn, his head striking the corner of a cabinet as he fell. Hugh's passion was stilled in an instant as he looked down on the motionless figure. The blood was oozing down the forehead where the poker had struck, but it was the blow on the back of the head which Hugh most feared. He lifted his uncle's arm, but it fell back limply; he bent down and listened for a heart-beat, but could hear nothing, and saw no sign of breathing. He rose to his feet and, white and trembling, looked down at the body.

The servants were so accustomed to the sound of his pistol-practice that none of them had paid any attention to the sound of the shot. Hugh picked up the weapon which had dropped from his uncle's hand and thrust it into his pocket, and then turned to find his aunt still unconscious.

Panic seized him. He hurried out of the room, and went straight to the stables, where he ordered a horse to be saddled. As soon as it was ready, he mounted and galloped away.

CHAPTER V

Across the Sea

Mr. Randolph the solicitor was at dinner when the servant told him that Hugh wanted to see him on a matter of the most urgent business. Hugh, white and tense of face, was walking feverishly up and down the little room as the kindly old man came in. The lawyer saw at once that something was very wrong indeed.

"What is it, Hugh? What's the matter, lad?"

"A great deal, Mr. Randolph. In fact, it's something about which I'd better not tell you, because you will be glad if you don't know about it after I'm gone. Will you let me have fifty pounds without asking me why I want it?"

"Of course I will, but for heaven's sake don't do anything rash," answered Mr. Randolph. "I wish you would confide in me."

"What's done can't be undone," Hugh answered grimly. "And talking about it can't do any good. Give me the money, sir, and let me get away as quickly as I can."

Without another word the solicitor went to his desk and produced the money in sovereigns, for which Hugh had asked instead of notes.

"Would you rather have a hundred, my boy?"

"I should indeed," Hugh answered, "if you can let me have it."

It was given to him in a small canvas bag. "Thanks, sir," said Hugh, "and, whatever you may hear, please believe that what I did was in self-defence." Without another word he opened the door and was gone.

Having ridden out of the town, he dismounted on the outskirts, took off the horse's bridle and turned the animal into a field. Strangely enough, he felt no remorse for having struck down his uncle. "He would have shot me if I hadn't hit him first," he thought, "though he will swear, if he does recover, that I tried to murder him. I shall be sent to prison if he gets better, and if he doesn't—well, I shall be better out of England."

With his coat-collar turned up and his hat pulled down, he walked to the railway station and bought a third-class ticket to Glasgow. The train was a slow one, stopping at many little stations. Hugh got out at one of them and bought a ticket for Carlisle; arriving there he took a ticket for the night-mail to London. From Euston he walked across the city to the docks, where he found a small steamer just starting for Hamburg. At Hamburg he took passage aboard an Atlantic liner sailing for America the next day. Anything he thought necessary in the way of clothes he bought at a small shop near the docks, together with a cheap trunk in which to stow them. Burdened with this, he went aboard and claimed the berth which he

had booked in a third-class cabin. Fortunately for Hugh, these were the days before passports were required for travelling about the world.

He believed himself to be quite safe from pursuit. He might be traced as far as Carlisle, but it would be believed that he had fled to Glasgow to catch some steamer sailing from that port; no one would think that he had gone to Hamburg to board a steamer for New York. As soon as the ship was fairly under way, he left his cabin to have a look around, and to taste some fresh air. On deck there was no distinction made between third-class passengers and the emigrants in the steerage, except that the third-class clustered near the companion-way leading to their own part of the ship, while the emigrants kept farther forward. There were not a great many steerage passengers. Emigrants of that class still usually travelled in sailing-ships for the sake of cheapness. Hugh's shipmates were mainly substantial-looking German farmers, going out with a small capital to settle down as farmers in the West.

There were, however, two or three other young Englishmen, with one of whom, named Luscombe, Hugh struck up an acquaintance before the voyage had continued many hours. Luscombe was about twenty, and Hugh found that he was the son of a wealthy landowner in Norfolk. Formerly a subaltern in a crack Hussar regiment, Luscombe, as he frankly stated, had made a mess of things, and because he

realized that it was his own fault, had resigned his commission, and decided to try and steady himself by two or three years of roughing it in America.

"I should never have been clear of trouble if I had stayed in the regiment," he told Hugh; "what I need is to fend for myself for a while, and to be dependent upon my own efforts. I'm going to prove to my father that I am a man, and not a young idiot only capable of getting myself into scrapes. I hope that, in a few years' time, he'll receive the prodigal with open arms."

Hugh was much slower in giving his confidence, but, before they reached New York, he had told Luscombe his reasons for leaving the old country. His new friend agreed that he had done quite right in knocking out his brute of an uncle. "Still, I agree with you, that it will be much pleasanter for you if he does recover, as I expect he will, or else it will be a mighty long time before you dare show your nose in England again. We'll know by the time we arrive in New York. If the papers in the next mail don't say anything about it, you may be pretty sure that he's got over that crack on the skull. 'Englishman slain by Nephew' would be far too startling a headline for the newspapers to miss, my lad, and if it's not in them, you can go about with an easy conscience."

The two young men decided to stick together, and when they arrived in New York, after a voyage which was completely uneventful, they put up at the same hotel before starting for the West. Luscombe was

some years older than Hugh, but both felt that they would do better as partners than by each going his own way. Hugh's mind was relieved of a tremendous burden when he saw the newspapers from England, which had been published a week after his flight from Cumberland, for they contained no mention at all of anything having happened at Byrneside.

"Congratulations, Hugh," said Luscombe, after they had searched every inch of every newspaper. "I expected that it would be all right. If your uncle had been a decent sort of fellow, you would have cracked his skull for sure, but bad 'uns always have brain-cases like negroes. Well, what about starting West to-morrow?"

They had decided that they would make a start in Texas, where they would take the first job offered them, while they looked round for something to their taste. Luscombe said that he thought he would join the cavalry, as he was certain that he would never stick to humdrum regular work.

"After all," he said, "I haven't got my fortune to make. It's only a question of passing a year or two until Mother and the girls bring Dad round into a decent state of mind again. He's a first-rate chap, and I can't say that I blame him for getting annoyed with my foolishness. I'm going to allow myself three years, anyway."

"I'm just about in the same position as you," Hugh agreed. "I shan't go back until I'm of age; then I

can snap my fingers at that precious uncle of mine. My trustee, old Mr. Randolph whom I told you about, will look after the estate. I'll write to him to-night and let him know that I'm all right, and very glad that my uncle was not killed. I'll tell him to expect me when I come of age and not before."

Next morning they boarded the train and travelled to what was in those days the rail-head in that direction, a station in Northern Texas. Travelling sometimes in stage-coaches, sometimes on foot, they arrived at the town of M'Kinney, a small place but one that was growing fast.

"Thank goodness for a hill or two," said Luscombe, when, dusty and travel-stained, they threw their small kits on the truckle beds of a room in a one-storeyed clapboard building in M'Kinney's dusty single street, which called itself the "Empire Hotel". "After three hundred miles of dusty flats it's a relief to see some rising ground again."

Like every other meal they had eaten since leaving the rail-head, the one they were offered here consisted of steaks, potatoes and cabbages, followed by stewed fruit. They had arrived at the dinner hour, and found seven or eight shirt-sleeved men sitting down in the room with them. Eating was a serious business, and nobody said a word while the meal lasted, every man's duty was to stow away as much food as possible in as short a time as he could, and only when he was full to think about conversation. When the meal was over

and the other diners had gone, the landlord, who had been sitting at the head of the table, looked up at them.

"Thinking of making a stay here?" he asked.

"Yes, if we can get work we like," Luscombe answered.

"M'Kinney's a rising place," said the landlord as he lit his pipe. "Two stores and eight houses are being built right now. I tell you that this town's got a great future in front of it."

Luscombe and Hugh hid their mirth. "Yes," the Texan went on. "M'Kinney's the chief town in this county. We're going to start putting up a courthouse in a month or two. Our sheriff's a pretty spry man, and he's not the sort to stand any nonsense. Say, we've got an orderly and law-abiding population; there were only two men shot here last week."

"That's fine," Luscombe agreed. "My pal and I are fairly peaceful characters. And is two about your average?"

"Well, I'm afraid that I can't say that," the landlord answered. "I guess that that'd be a little too good to expect. Week before last Buck Harris, and three of his gang, rode in and set up the town."

"What d'you mean by 'set-up'?" Luscombe asked. The landlord stared his surprise at such a question.

"Set-up?" he said. "Well, I 'spose it means to ride into a place, clear out the saloons, and to take a

potshot at anyone fool enough to stand outside his door, and then to ride hell-for-leather along the streets firing through the windows. Buck Harris's gang had done it two or three times before, and as five men had been killed, the citizens became annoyed."

"I'm not surprised," Hugh put in. "What happened?"

"The sheriff got a few men together, and the citizens began to fire back through their windows. Buck Harris and two of his men were killed, but they shot four of the folks. Since then we've had quiet. What sort of work d'you reckon you'd like; perhaps I could help you to find it?"

"Amongst horses if we can get it," Luscombe answered.

The landlord shook his head. "You'll have to go farther south to the big ranches for that," he said. "This is no horse country. If you were carpenters, now, there's plenty of work. A good workman can pick up four dollars a day. Then there's James Pawson's wood-yard. I reckon you might get a job there. One of his hands was shot in the fight with Buck Harris, and another broke his leg last week. I reckon that there'd be room for you; Madden, the man who was killed, used to board here."

"What's your charge, landlord?" asked Hugh.

"Three square meals for seventy-five cents a day, a buck a day if you lodge as well. But I've got no room to put you up just now as I've got to keep a

couple of rooms for travellers. But you'll have no trouble in getting a room for about a dollar a week, and you can feed here."

"Shall we try the wood-yard, Luscombe?" Hugh asked.

"Righto," the other agreed, and they made arrangements for boarding at the hotel. They went down the straggling street until they came to a pile of sawn timber. The name Pawson was painted in large letters on the fence. A man and boy were moving planks.

"Want a job?" the man asked, as they came toward him.

"Yes, if there's anything doing."

"What wages d'you think you're worth?"

"As much as we can get," grinned Luscombe.

"Dollar-fifty daily for the first week, and if you're any good I'll raise you to two bucks a day after that," said the man, who introduced himself as Pawson.

The two Englishmen stripped off their coats and fell to work, moving and piling planks according to their sizes. Before they had been at it half an hour there was a shout, and a wagon, laden with planks, rolled into the yard. Throughout the day the partners, with their sleeves rolled up, stuck to their work, and finished at six o'clock, feeling as though their backs were broken. When Pawson told them that they were through for the day, neither could stand upright, whilst their hands were covered with blisters.

"You've done pretty well," he said. "I'm not a

man to stint half a dollar, so you can start to-morrow at two bucks a day without waiting a week for it."

"That's not a bad beginning, Luscombe," said Hugh, as they walked away to put on their coats.

"We've earned a dollar," his friend agreed, "and we've broken our backs, blistered our hands, and lost four or five pounds of flesh to do it."

"I wish that we hadn't turned up our sleeves," Hugh groaned. "My arms feel as though they'd been roasted. I had no idea that the sun was so strong."

"Mine are smarting like blazes. We shall be in a fine state by to-morrow. Let's stay at the hotel to-night, Hugh, I'm so tired that I'm hanged if I can bear to think of looking for lodgings after we've had supper."

Next morning their arms were red raw and very painful. Before starting for work they got some oil from the landlord and rubbed them. "Sleeves down to-day, old man," said Luscombe. "Gosh, mine feel like a burned steak!"

They worked away until dinner-time, and then could not stick any longer the rasping of their sleeves on their skin. Luscombe went up to Pawson and pulled up his cuffs. "Have a look at that," he said. "We've just got to knock off for the day. If there is anything special you want done, we'll do our best, but we'd rather finish up for the day."

"Sure, boys, knock-off," Pawson said. "Take it easy for a few days until you get accustomed to the

work, we ain't slave-drivers out here in the south-west. Get your arms well rubbed at once; then to-night wash off the oil to give them a chance to harden, and in the morning powder them well with flour."

As soon as they had had their dinner they went and found lodgings for themselves, a room with two beds in it, and moved their gear from the hotel. They spent the afternoon dozing in the shade of a thick cactus-hedge, and the next morning felt all the better for their rest. The inflammation of their arms had died down a lot, and they felt ready for work.

"Why do you carry that revolver in the evenings, Hugh, when you don't wear it during the day?" Luscombe asked, as he saw him put the gun in his hip pocket, after they had had a wash at their lodgings. This was when the day's work was finished, and they were thinking of starting off for a walk.

"I don't want it sticking up out of my pocket when I'm working," Hugh said. "But at night it doesn't show under my coat, and every man here carries a gun."

"I think it is safer without one," Luscombe replied. "The biggest tough of the lot won't draw on an unarmed man."

"They probably wouldn't if they were sober," Hugh agreed, "but most of the shooting in this town's done when they've had too much to drink. My worthy uncle once said, 'A man doesn't often want a gun, but when he does, he needs it pretty badly'."

A few days later they heard that three outlaws had ridden into M'Kinney, swearing that they meant to have vengeance for the killing of Buck Harris and his mates. One of the gunmen had been swaggering about the town all day, boasting that he meant to wipe out every citizen who had had a hand in the shooting. The sheriff was out of town, off with two of his deputies hunting a man who had murdered a settler and his wife down in the swamps of the East Fork, and he was likely to be away for a day or two. Gilbert, the under-sheriff, was a good enough man, but he was one of those who fight best under a leader, and seldom went into a row on his own account.

"But you are not going to let three men terrorize the whole town, are you?" asked Hugh.

"Well, compadre," said the man to whom they were speaking, "when those three men are Dutch Sam, Wild Harvey and Black Jake, a sensible man keeps his head down. Those three are just about as much poison as you could find in the whole State of Texas. Any one of 'em is good enough to set-up a town on his own, and when it comes to the three of 'em being together, it's best to keep out of gun-range. You're new in these parts, and you don't know what it means. When you've been here a few months you'll realize that it's best to steer clear when three toughs like that are raring for blood."

Whilst he was talking there came a sudden roar, a shouting and yelling and the clattering of hoofs out-

side. Then came the thunder of gun-fire and splinters of the three upper panes of the window came tinkling into the room as the flying bullets beat them in. Every man at the hotel table ducked his head, expecting the next volley to come smashing through the second row of panes. Another yell of mad laughter in the street was followed by the sound of horses galloping furiously away.

"That's only their fun for the present," growled one man. "Just wait until they are drunk enough to turn savage."

"Hanged if I can see any fun in firing through windows," said Luscombe.

"Stranger, you haven't seen nothing yet," said another man. "Why——"

The door at the farther end of the room flew open, and a white-faced man stood staring in at the diners.

"Have you heard the news?" he stuttered. "Dutch Sam and his mates broke open the door of the under-sheriff's house, pulled him out, and pumped a dozen bullets into him!"

There was a roar of anger. "If the under-sheriff had done his duty and called a posse," said Hugh, "he wouldn't have been shot down like a dog."

"Let's go round the houses," said one man, "and get every man to take his station at his window to shoot down these brutes as they ride past."

"Say, that wouldn't be giving Dutch Sam a fair show," objected one man.

"Did the under-sheriff get a fair show?" snorted the first speaker. "Let's wipe 'em out."

The door was opened, and after it was seen that none of the outlaws were in sight, the party scattered to rouse the citizens of M'Kinney. Luscombe and Hugh stood chatting to the landlord for nearly half an hour, but the man did not think that the citizens would pluck up enough courage to attack the murderers.

"If the sheriff was here they might try it," he said, "but, without him, there's none of them've got the nerve to be the ones to start trouble. They don't trust each other, and they're each afraid of being abandoned if they start to fight. Dutch Sam and company'll be in here pretty soon, and they'll just about drink my bar dry, and never pay a nickel for their liquor. Worse, they'll begin firing at the bottles and smashing all that they can't use."

"I think M'Kinney ought to be ashamed of itself," broke in Hugh. "There are over a hundred men in this town and they let three ruffians do just as they like."

"It certainly sounds bad put in that fashion," agreed the landlord. "But you've got to remember that these three desperadoes can shoot out the ace of spades at twenty paces. They each carry two revolvers, which means that they hold twelve men's lives in their hands. They're so quick on the draw that they can fire all twelve shots before an ordinary man can clear leather with his own guns."

"Why not close the hotel for the night?" Luscombe asked. "Then they couldn't come in and drink your place dry, and smash your goods up."

"Couldn't they?" and the landlord grinned mirthlessly. "Why, if I dared to do that, they'd blow the door open with their pistols, and as like as not burn the house around my ears."

"The best thing we can do is to get home, Hugh," said Luscombe. "The sooner that we're quietly in bed the better. Our room's at the back of the house, and these outlaws can fire away at the front as much as ever they like."

The two of them started off down the street to go to their lodgings, but they had hardly covered a dozen yards before they heard the thudding of hoofs.

"Look out, below there!" shouted a voice from an upper window. "Here's one of them coming. Run round to the back; you'll find the door open. That fellow on the horse is roaring mad, and he'll shoot you down."

"Come on, Hugh," Luscombe shouted, "run for it!"

"I'm hanged if I will," said Hugh, his jaw set. "You haven't a gun, Luscombe, so you'd better jump clear. I'm going after this bird who's making all the trouble."

"I'm not leaving you on your own," answered Luscombe stubbornly. "Anyway, it's too late—here he comes!"

Hugh had transferred his pistol to his jacket pocket. As the horseman came closer, he saw the moonlight glint on a pistol-barrel in the outstretched hand. The muzzle flamed in the darkness, but Hugh had dropped to one knee and the bullet thudded into the wall just behind where his head had been before he ducked. In one lightning movement Hugh's gun was in his hand, and as he pressed the trigger, two other shots screamed into the night from the window above him. The rider threw up his hands, and then, as though thrown from a sling, pitched over the crupper of his saddle and crashed to the ground, while the well-trained animal slid to an instantaneous halt, to stand still by the side of his fallen master.

"Come on, Luscombe," Hugh shouted, "the sooner we're out of the way the better."

They started to take to their heels but, before they had covered twenty yards, the racket made by two horses pounding down upon them sounded in the street.

"Round the corner of that house, man," panted Hugh. "The outlaws may be scared to pass the ambush in the windows, but, even if they do, they'll be thinking more of making a getaway than about us."

The two lads hurled themselves round the corner of the building, and, as they did so, the quick flashes of rifles and revolvers stabbed the darkness whilst the night was filled with the crashing volleys of gunfire. A man dashed past them at the gallop, one of his arms

hanging uselessly at his side, the reins loose on the horse's neck.

"I expect that they've killed the other," Hugh panted, "and that fellow's badly winged. Come on, bed for us."

Luscombe did not speak until they reached their room, and Hugh had lit the candle, then he said:

"Well, you are a fine one, Hugh. You always say that you are all against quarrels, and here you are throwing yourself into this one, and standing up to a madman as though you had been fighting outlaws all your life."

"He attacked me," Hugh answered, "and I didn't fire first. You are the chap to be blamed, old man; you hadn't got a gun, and yet you stayed there like a lunatic. Let's turn in and forget about it."

CHAPTER VI

A Horse Deal

After they had been at work in the timber-yard for a week, Hugh and his chum found their muscles getting used to the heavy toil. By that time they had got the yard into order and Pawson, finding that he could rely upon them, put them on to more varied work, and left them to look after things themselves, while he saw to his more important business at the sawmill. Luscombe and Hugh got to know a good many of the townsfolk through selling them lumber and helping to load their wagons, but three months after their arrival in M'Kinney, Hugh saw that Luscombe was getting tired of the job. One night Hugh asked his partner if he had had about enough of the timber-yard.

"Well, I wouldn't say that I'm tired of it," Luscombe answered, "but I've got an urge to get a move on, and try something else."

"Then for goodness' sake," said Hugh, "don't think that you are bound to stand by me. We've broken the ice, and both learned our way about in America. We agreed from the first that we wouldn't stand in

each other's way. If you want to move on, don't bother about me."

"Thanks, old chap. I think that I'll strike out for Fort M'Kayett and enlist in the cavalry. I can go by road by way of Meridian. I'll get that far by wagon, and pick up a horse for a few dollars when I get there. Then I can travel by the ford of the Colorado River and bear west, stopping at the ranches until I reach the fort. The pay of a trooper is not much, but I'll be happier at that than anything else and, after all, the pay does not matter a rap. I hear that the Indians are pretty troublesome, and there'll be more excitement fighting them than in staying here, where there's none. The only drawback is that I don't like leaving you, Hugh."

"Don't worry about that," Hugh answered. "Of course, I'll be sorry to lose you, and in any case I shan't stay here very long after you're gone."

Luscombe told Pawson next morning that he was moving. The boss was sorry to lose him, but after Luscombe had gone, he offered Hugh a job up at the sawmill, saying that he was certain that he would like to learn something fresh. On the following Monday morning Hugh got a lift in the wagon to the mill. It was a drive he never forgot. The road was nothing but a track across country, and Hugh hung on like grim death, expecting to be shaken off every minute. At the end of about three miles the animals in the traces slackened their terrific pace, just when he thought that his aching arms would not hold him any longer.

"That was just their play," said the driver. "They know that they won't get the chance of another gallop to-day, and they like to lay themselves down for a run whenever the going is good."

"Gosh, man," panted Hugh, "d'you call that good going?"

"Sure thing," said the driver amazed. "Why, it was all level ground with nary a watercourse to spoil it. You weren't expecting a racecourse all levelled and graded, were you?"

Hugh was not quite sure what he had expected, but by the time he got to the mill, and had suffered the agonies of being bumped and rattled along the stretches which the driver himself called bad, he was inclined to agree that those first three miles had been like heaven. The driver gave him a long lecture on the advantages of mules over horses for haulage work, and showed him how they had double the intelligence of the very best horses.

At times the track was nothing but bare smooth rock, so that the mules could hardly keep their footing on the slippery surface; at others it wound along the sides of hills, the track being so much higher on one side than on the other that Hugh marvelled the wagon did not capsize. Sometimes they descended sharply into steep lateral ravines cut by streams, and had to scramble up the farther sides. The hills were covered with scrub and brushwood, for the larger timber had already been felled for the mills. At long

last the wagon turned up the rocky bed of a stream running through a rocky gorge.

"Here we are," the driver said, and round the next bend they came upon the sawmills—a roughly built structure with a water-wheel. A low log hut stood beside it, whilst, beyond, the valley opened out again. At the upper end its slopes were still covered with large trees, but the mill had already devoured all those from the lower ground. A dam had been built across the stream with a lade cut to supply the water-wheel, which was sunk five feet beneath the level of the surrounding ground, the tail-race being carried down nearly to the mouth of the gorge, where the water fell back again into the old bed of the stream. The noise of the machinery drowned that of their arrival, but the driver's whistle brought a man to the door. He nodded to Hugh and said, "The new hand, I guess," and then turned to the driver with a question about stores he was to bring from town.

Hugh followed the foreman in to the mill where he was introduced to one of the hands who undertook to tell him all he would have to know about the job. Hugh found that the work was far more interesting than it had been in M'Kinney, and he soon fell into the way of things. Food was plentiful, if plain, and the negro cook was a top-hand at his job. The foreman warned Hugh of the terrible accidents that would follow carelessness in handling the deadly circular saws.

"There have been several men badly hurt since we started here," he told him, "but that's generally their own fault. It's fine and healthy up here in the hills and, what's better, it's cool enough to sleep comfortably at nights, though it's darned cold in the winter. The boss feeds us well, and the pay's more than you can get working on a farm, so I reckon you'll be mighty comfortable."

Hugh liked the work, and the keen mountain air braced him up, and every day he found it more and more easy to do his share in handling the heavy baulks of timber. The other men were pleasant fellows, and he enjoyed listening to their yarns at night in the bunk-house. Two of them had been gold-mining in California before they came down to Texas; one had worked at teaming on the Santa Fé trail; another had been a sailor, deserted his ship at Galveston, then enlisted and served at a cavalry-post on the plains for three years, before deserting again and starting two years as a cowboy on a Texas ranch. Then he had gone down to work as a ranchero in Mexico, before he went on to the coast, worked his passage aboard a ship back to Galveston, where he had worked as farm-hand before coming to M'Kinney and starting in the saw-mill!

Another of the men had been a cowboy, but he had not stuck it for very long.

"I was just a week at it," he said with a grin, "and then I quit. What with being thrown off a horse

twenty times a day, and the work and the ragging of the other boys, seven days was plenty long enough at that job for this child. I've been in one or two Indian fights and not felt too badly scared, but those cowboys frightened me plenty. I'd be sitting quiet, when bang! Off would go a pistol and a bullet would knock my pipe out of my mouth, and they'd laugh fit to bust when I got up and swore. Then, when we'd all be sitting round the fire, some fool would take it into his head to shoot at a knot of flaming wood, half a dozen others'd chime in, and do the same, and bits of the fire began flying in all directions, mixed up with buzzing bullets. How we weren't all killed I don't know. I stuck it a week and then I had enough of cowboys to last me a lifetime. I quit and started to look for a quieter sort of job."

"I guess that you were about right," agreed Bill Royce, the ex-sailor. "Anyone who wants to start as a cowboy wants to know how to ride and throw a rope, and be greased lightning with his gun, before he looks for work on a ranch."

Next day Hugh asked the teamster to bring him from M'Kinney a rope such as the cowboys used. Bill Royce examined it when it arrived. "It'll do," he said, "though most of the cowboys and Mexicans make their own ropes out of strips of raw hide, which they work and grease until they run as smoothly as silk. Yes, it's right for length, just forty feet; some men use fifty, and I have seen Mexicans who could handle

a sixty-foot length, but that's out of ordinary, and forty's the usual. I'll make an eye-splice at one end for you so that you can have a running noose. It should be three or four feet across. When you get expert you can make the noose smaller, as then the jerk comes quicker and a small noose is more efficient. Now, try using that two-foot tree stump out there as a mark."

He showed Hugh how to form his loop and to cast, and soon his pupil began to get the hang of it. As the evenings passed he began to get fairly expert with the rope. By the end of the month he could make a thirty-foot cast and be sure of dropping the noose over the stump nearly every time. He also took Royce's advice as to the pistol; he had had no practice since arriving at M'Kinney, but now he got a belt and holsters like those used by the cowboys, and spent most of his spare time practising the draw and shooting from the hip at targets.

With constant practice, Hugh began to develop unusual speed in clearing his pistol from its holster and in hitting his mark. His fingers seemed to close upon the butt in exactly the right position, and as his hand shot up, his thumb cocked the hammer whilst his forefinger closed upon the trigger. Royce, astonished, told him that he had the slickness of a conjurer."

By the time that the summer was over Hugh had become a master of both rope and pistol. "Gee! I've seen a lot of shooting in my time," said Bill Royce one day, "but I've never seen anyone, cowboy, Mex, or

Indian, so quick on the draw as you, Hugh, and there are plenty who can draw pretty fast. You shoot fair, but nothing out of the ordinary; there's many a cowboy who's a better shot, but for a quick draw you are a marvel, and it's the draw that counts. When one man's got his gun out, the other's just got to cave in."

The trees in the valley were pretty well finished, and with the approach of winter, it was decided to move the sawmill to a new location, while the teamsters would drag the trunks over the frozen snow so that there would be a good supply ready for the time when spring would thaw the ice on the river and allow the water-wheel to turn again. The axemen were to move on to the new groves to cut the timber for the teamsters, but the work of the mill-hands was over for the season. Hugh was glad to be finished with the labour, and the first thing that he did on reaching M'Kinney was to buy a horse.

"Here's a bit of advice, Hugh," said Bill Royce, when he heard that his friend wanted an animal. "When you buy a horse, make the man from whom you get it come with you to a Justice of the Peace or even the sheriff before the deal's closed. It may save you from a hanging later on."

"What on earth do you mean, Bill?" Hugh asked.

"A good many of the horses you'll find for sale have come up from the south," Bill explained, "and most of them are very fine animals. Now there's always a sale for a good horse down in the ranch country, and,

if you see one up here, you can bet your bottom dollar that the man who is selling it doesn't want to do very much explaining about how he came by it. You buy the horse, ride down south, someone recognizes the animal as having been stolen, and they hang men on the nearest branch for horse-stealing down in the cowboy country. They don't bother much about explanations; the stolen horse is enough evidence for them, but if you've got a bill-of-sale properly witnessed by a justice or by a sheriff, they'll know that you bought it honestly and in good faith. Of course you may ride a stolen horse all its life and never be unlucky enough to hit the place from which it was stolen, but the thousandth chance may come off, and, if you haven't got that bill-of-sale, you won't escape getting your neck stretched."

Hugh saw the sense of Bill Royce's advice, and when he put up at the hotel at M'Kinney, and a couple of tough-looking men approached him to try and sell a horse, he had Bill with him. The two men were dressed in wide-brimmed hats, with red shirts over which they wore jackets of leather with silver buttons. They were girdled with bright sashes and sported high riding-boots.

Bill was suspicious of them from the very first, and when he saw what a fine animal they were offering for the dirt-cheap price of two hundred dollars, he warned Hugh to be more than ever on his guard. The deal was finally closed in the saloon, but when Hugh said that

he would only buy if the sale was witnessed by the sheriff and James Pawson, one of the men became very angry, and asked right out if he was suspected of having stolen the horse. He calmed down when Bill soothed him by suggesting that he might have bought the horse, without being aware of it, from some rustler, and agreed to Hugh's demands.

The sheriff asked to see the brand of the horse, and made out a circled "E", and then issued a certificate that Hugh Tunstall had bought a horse branded in this fashion from one Jack Wittingham, and signed the paper, with Pawson's signature below his.

Hugh was delighted with his purchase, a beautiful roan that had all the marks of speed and endurance about him. The next morning when he went to the stable, he found that the two tough-looking men had left the town. The horse met him in fighting spirit, but talking gently and soothingly to it, Hugh went into its stall and stroked its muzzle. When it had quietened down he took its head-rope and led it out into the yard.

"You're a beauty," Hugh said, running his eye over him. "Say, landlord, have you ever seen so well put together an animal, with such splendid quarters, such fine bone and so beautifully muscled?"

"He's certainly a fine horse," agreed the landlord. "He's a bit bigger than the usual run, and he's worth twice the money you gave for him. He's what we call a mustang, and down in the south country you could

get a big price for him. I guess those two hombres were scared to take him down there, for I expect that it is too well-known; you don't see a horse like that every day, and you'll be mighty glad that you got that certificate before you're finished. By the way, you'll be wanting a saddle and bridle. Jim Hoskings has got one to sell; he mentioned it to me about a fortnight ago."

An hour later Hugh was the owner of a Texan saddle, one with a high peak and cantle, far different from those to which he had been accustomed in Cumberland. He saddled up and mounted, and felt very strange and uncomfortable at first. The stirrup-leathers were placed farther back than those on an English saddle, whilst the stirrups themselves were very large and broad, and the position of the leathers made him ride with a straight leg, and grip with his thighs instead of his knees. Hugh trotted down the street until he reached the open country, when he shook the reins and the horse immediately fell into a hand gallop, which he found wonderfully smooth and easy. At the end of an hour Hugh returned to the hotel even more delighted with his purchase.

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CHAPTER VII

Among the Cowboys

"Now that you've got your horse and outfit, Hugh, what d'you aim to do next?" Bill Royce asked him, after he had carefully examined the pack-horse which Hugh had added to his purchase.

"I don't quite know," he answered. "I thought of doing a bit of teaming, but the horse has spoilt me for that. I think that I'd like to be my own master for a bit, and do some hunting on the plains, while I work my way across to Santa Fé. When I get there I'll take anything that turns up. I've got three hundred dollars in cash, and that ought to last a good time. The only thing is that I don't know anything about the country or the life, and I reckon that I need a partner. What about coming in with me, Bill?"

"I'd like to," Bill replied. "Only I've not got enough to buy an outfit. If you like to start me with one, I reckon we'd be about square, for I know the plains like the palm of my hand, and my help would about settle for the money you lay out."

Hugh agreed at once, and in three days they were off. Bill picked up a horse for forty dollars, bought two

rifles, a saddle and bridle for himself and saddle-bags for the pack-horse. A large stock of ammunition was laid in; flour, tea and sugar, and four blankets, with a few odds and ends, completed the outfit, and they started off due south from M'Kinney so as to work round the hills. After the first few days they found themselves in absolutely open country.

"Now we can begin our search for game," Bill announced. "You any good as a shot?"

"Pretty fair with a shot-gun," Hugh answered, "but I've had no practice with a rifle."

"Oh, you'll soon pick it up," Bill assured him. "Anyone who can manage a Colt is sure to be good with a rifle."

For the next four months the couple wandered over the plains, and Hugh grew to love the new life immensely. As winter was fast setting in when they started, they had directed their course south-westward, and enjoyed warm weather as they went down towards the Mexican border. There was plenty of game for the pot, and they often saw herds of wild horses and semi-wild cattle which had strayed from distant ranches. It was strange for Hugh, accustomed to the little fields of England, to be able to travel freely in any direction, sometimes passing a couple of weeks without seeing another human being. Occasionally they spent the night at the camp-fire of a party of cowboys; sometimes they stayed with a wandering hunter like themselves, or with ranchmen in search of stray animals.

Their expenses were next to nothing, for even such things as tea, sugar and flour, could be obtained in exchange for venison.

Hugh learned to use his rope with considerable skill on horseback, for he practised daily. Once he tried his throw upon Bill and would have given him a nasty fall if the man had not reined his horse on to its haunches the moment he felt the rope. Prince, as Hugh called his roan, was thoroughly up to his work. The instant Hugh threw the rope, Prince checked and braced himself, with forelegs extended, to take the shock, and had it not been for Bill's quickness he would have been torn from his saddle. That was about the only time the partners nearly quarrelled. Hugh was full of apologies.

As spring approached, Hugh suggested that they should try their luck on a ranch instead of striking down for Santa Fé, and to this Bill agreed.

"Mind you, Hugh," he warned him, "there's no fooling about a cowboy's life. It's just about the hardest existence there is. However, you won't feel it as badly as most tenderfeet, for you can ride, use your gun and throw a rope, though you've still got a mighty lot to learn. You'll find it a difficult business learning to ride a horse that's never been backed, but it's a mighty fine thing to be able to do. I'm all for trying it. I've been a cowboy before and liked it, and, anyway, it's a job that you can chuck whenever you want to."

"But how about Prince?" Hugh asked, "I can't give him up."

"You won't have to. Every cowboy has to have a string of nearly a dozen horses, and he just ropes one out of the cavvy—that's the horse-herd—and takes any to which he happens to take a fancy. You can either let Prince run with the rest, or else leave him at the headquarters station."

"What on earth do they want so many horses for?" Hugh asked in amazement.

"Work!" answered Bill. "A man can go on for ever, but a horse can't. You'll find that you use up half a dozen horses in the twenty-four hours, and they'll want a day's rest before they're fit again. I expect that the round-up'll be just about starting, so we'd better head for the ranch country before the outfits are full up. I worked for the Circle Triangle a couple of years ago; their station isn't above a hundred and fifty miles from here. The boss isn't a bad sort, so we may as well go there's well as anywhere else."

On the third evening they arrived at the Circle Triangle ranch. There was a long, low building, the storeroom and general farm, with the manager's house near by, flanked by the bunkhouse for the men. A short distance away was a fenced-in enclosure of fifty or sixty acres, where some of the more valuable animals, a few fine bulls and a couple of dozen horses, were kept. The ranch buildings lay in a hollow, down which a thin belt of trees ran to give some shade in the summer-

time, and to act as a wind-break in the cold weather. A score of men were standing or sitting near the bunk-house, and as many more came out when they saw the strangers riding up. A couple recognized Bill.

"Hullo, Bill!" shouted one. "I thought you'd been rubbed out. Where've you been all this time?"

"Down in Mexico and parts north," Bill called back. "Here's my partner, he's a Britisher, but a decent sort. Hugh's the name."

The man held out his calloused hand, and Hugh wrung it. "Aiming to make a stay?" he was asked.

"Looking for work if there's any going," Hugh answered.

"Gosh! You'll find plenty of work if that's what you're looking for," laughed one of the cowboys. "That's a mighty fine bit of horseflesh, Hugh," and they clustered round to admire Prince. "He's far too good for ordinary work, though he'll do fine for scouting round and hunting for cattle in the foothills. Where'd you get him?"

"M'Kinney," Hugh answered. "Bought him off a couple of fellows who wanted to sell him cheap."

"Guess he didn't cost 'em much," grunted one of the men. "Well, you'll be all right so long as you don't happen across the fellow who lost him. I reckon he must have come from one of the Mexican ranches down south; you don't often see such a fine bit of horseflesh north of the border."

"Here's the boss, Hugh," Bill called out. "We may

as well speak to him at once," and they walked together over towards a tall man who had just come out of the manager's house.

"Got room for a couple of hands?" Bill asked, when they reached him. "I worked here a couple of years ago. My partner's new to the job, but he can ride and shoot as well as throw a rope."

"It's you again, Bill, is it?" said the manager. "Yes, I'll put you both on the pay-roll. Forty dollars a month, thirty for your mate, until he shows that he knows the job."

"That'll suit," Bill answered. "You'll be putting him up to forty mighty soon."

When they rejoined the cowboys, Hugh was very interested in watching them while Bill talked. Every man of them was dressed in the usual cowboy fashion, a wide Stetson hat, trousers of soft untanned leather and batwing chaps. They were spare, active men, keen-faced and bright-eyed, looking as though they had all been made in the same mould. All carried revolvers and most of them had a long knife thrust into belt or sash. They wore high boots cut away behind at the bend of the knee, but coming several inches higher in front.

Presently the banging of a pan in the bunkhouse sent them all running for a meal. Hugh and Bill had off-saddled in the meantime, and were soon sitting at the long table. There was no shortage of food. Heaped dishes of meat and potatoes awaited the hungry mob,

with great chunks of bread hot from the oven, and huge pannikins of milk and tea. Supper over, pipes were lighted, and Hugh listened to the yarns that were spun around him. He was struck by the quiet way the men talked, and by the absence of argument, as well as by the way they sat silently listening to the speaker, whoever he was, and he wondered if these really could be the wild cowboys of whose doings he had heard so much.

Gradually they slipped off to their beds, a double row of bunks running along the four walls of the house. A great stove stood in the middle of the long room. Hugh and Bill threw their kit into empty bunks and were soon sound asleep. Next morning they handed over what was left of their stores to the storekeeper. They were credited with the value, which they took out in buying cowboy clothes for themselves, and then joined the rest of the crew in a strongly fenced corral close to the enclosed sixty acres.

A few minutes later several of the hands rode up driving a herd of horses, the men riding behind cracking their whips and yelling at the top of their voices, until they had all the animals safe in the field. The first job was to rope those which bore no brand, and put the right mark on them. As soon as a horse was caught, four cowboys hung on to the ropes whilst another came up with the heated branding-iron and applied it to the horse's withers. The operation lasted only a second or two, and then the frightened animals

were loosed and allowed to rejoin their companions standing in a bunch in one corner.

"Every man of No. 1 and No. 2 outfits take one of them!" shouted the manager.

Bill and Hugh belonged to No. 2, and like the others they had brought their saddles and ropes with them. Hugh picked out a horse he liked, and threw his noose round its neck. A cowboy beside him told him that he had picked a rogue, and advised him to get his lasso on to another animal.

"I've got to learn to sit any of 'em," answered Hugh, "so I might as well begin with a bad one."

"Just as you like," said the other, and gave him a hand to help haul on the rope. The horse fought violently, but the throttling rope soon brought him out of the bunch. "I'll hold him," said the man. "You get your saddle and bridle."

But there was no chance of saddling it until another cowboy had roped its hind legs and held them while Hugh cinched up the girths.

"Up you go, lad!" shouted the first man, and, gathering the reins, Hugh swung into the saddle.

For a moment the amazed horse stood perfectly still. "Keep his head up!" shouted one of the men, but before Hugh could draw in the reins, the horse had dropped its head between its knees. Then it seemed to Hugh that his mount doubled itself up, and before he knew what was happening he was sailing through the air, to land with a crash on the hard ground. There

was a shout of laughter from the cowboys, but a couple of them helped him to his feet. Hugh stood there almost stunned.

"Is that what you call bucking?" he asked.

"That's bucking, partner, sure enough," grinned one of the hands who had helped him.

"I'll have another shot at him in a minute," said Hugh, his teeth set.

"Take it quietly, son," said the man good-naturedly. "You've had a heavy fall; better hitch him to the fence and take a rest before you try again."

Hugh did as he was told, and sat down to watch the bronco-buster at work. He was fighting one of the most vicious of the last year's horses, and Hugh's eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw the savage tactics of the animal. This genuine bucking was new to him, and he saw at once that the horse could do it only if it first got its head well down. The moment it did this it sprang straight into the air, at the same time arching its back, and came down with all its four legs as stiff as wooden posts, giving its rider a tooth-rattling jar. Before the man had time to recover himself, the horse repeated the performance, varying it by springing in all directions. The bronco-buster sat perfectly erect, keeping a tremendous grip with his thighs but depending more upon his sense of balance than upon his hold. Occasionally he used his spurs, and exciting his mount to continue its desperate efforts, until at last the animal was almost exhausted and

stood with its head drooping, unable to make another effort.

"Bully for you, Jake!" shouted the cowboys standing by. "He's a brute, and we don't mean maybe."

"He's a good beast," answered the buster. "Worth taking a little trouble over. I'll give him a turn every day for a week, and give him a gallop to-morrow."

"Do they buck when they're galloping?" Hugh asked his neighbour.

"Do they?" snorted the cowboy. "You watch 'em! Not when they're at full gallop, they haven't time then, but at a canter they'll go straight up in the air and come down three yards sideways, and you'll be mighty lucky if you're anywhere near when they touch earth again."

Hugh rose to have another go at his mount. He thought he was ready for what was to come, but in spite of his preparedness, he was promptly thrown high out of his saddle by the first buck. Before he recovered his seat the second hit him like a hammer, and he felt his balance going. The third sent him sailing over the horse's head, but this time, ready for the fall, he landed fairly lightly.

The cowboys cheered, and told him to lay off for the day, but Hugh's blood was up, and he was determined to finish the job. Jake, the bronco-buster, strolled up to him.

"Don't keep your back so stiff, youngster," he said. "Just let it go as though you hadn't any bones in

your spine. I've seen a man's back snapped before to-day. Hold yourself easy and lissome and keep your head, that's the main thing. It ain't easy to do when you're being pitched about like a ball, but everything depends upon that. Close your legs tight each time you come down, even if it's only for a moment; that'll save you from being thrown."

Hugh got into the saddle again, and again the fight was on. Twice more he was thrown, but when he had mounted for the fifth time, he could feel that the horse's action was less sudden and violent, and that it was growing fatigued with its violent exertions.

"Now, you brute," he growled, "it's my turn," and dug in his spurs. Up went the horse in the most violent buck of all, and for a couple of minutes Hugh lost all sense of his whereabouts, hardly knowing if he was on his head or his back. But he felt that he was gaining the mastery, and, as the horse's efforts began to slacken, he spurred it again. The response was less violent than before, and in five minutes it stood exhausted and subdued. A cheer broke from all the cowboys, who had stopped their own work to watch the fight between the tenderfoot and the bronco.

"I think you'll have to give me a hand from the saddle," grinned Hugh weakly. "Every bone in my body's bust, and I couldn't lift a leg to save my life."

A couple of the hands helped him down. "Take my tip, youngster," said one of them, "keep walking about

for the next hour, even if you think it'll kill you. Then go and wrap yourself up in a couple of blankets and lie down in your bunk for a spell. Have a good sweat before you get up and rub yourself down. Tell your partner to rub down your back, then dress and keep moving. Keep yourself from getting stiff, though you'll feel mighty sore for a day or two."

Hugh followed the advice. He found it torture to keep moving for the recommended hour, but, when he woke up after the sleep that followed, and found Bill standing over his bunk, ready to rub him down, he already felt better. An hour later he was dressed and strolling down the stockyard where he stood watching other cowboys mastering their new mounts and going through what he had suffered himself.

Next day the work of breaking-in the broncos continued. One after another they were roped and saddled. They were blindfolded until Jake was in the saddle, when the bandage was ripped off and the struggle recommenced. As soon as the animal was mastered, the rails of the corral were let down and the bronco was taken for a hard gallop across country, returning submissive and trembling. Then the process was repeated with a fresh animal.

"How long does he take to break-in a horse?" Hugh asked.

"Three days, generally, then he hands them over for us to finish."

"It must take a terrible lot out of them," Hugh

went on, "surely it'd be better to do the job more gradually? You see, they are scared to death before Jake starts on 'em."

"He can't afford the time," the cowboy answered. "He gets two dollars a horse, and in the fortnight he's here he has about a hundred to break, so he's got to get a jerk on."

"It must be the deuce of a strain on him."

"It certainly is. A buster seldom lasts more than two years. They get all shaken and clean broken-up by the end of that time," the cowboy said.

Hugh started on his job of finishing off the breaking of the string of horses which had been handed over to him as his own. But he was too fond of horses to use the violent methods his companions employed. He tried to use English ideas, but soon found that they were useless, and he had to revert to those of the cowboys, although he modified them as far as he could. He had several severe battles with that first animal he had chosen, which proved the most vicious of all, but the struggle became each day less severe as the horse began to recognize its master. Finally, although he took longer than the rest, Hugh had as fine a string of horses for his work as any man at the ranch, and what was more, he had made a most favourable impression upon the older hands by the plucky way in which he had handled that first bronco of his.

CHAPTER VIII

A Rattlesnake Diet

One morning four wagons started off from the ranch-house, one for each of the outfits. They headed south, searching the whole width of range for their cattle as they moved to the round-up. Other outfits were coming up from the south and in from the east, all to meet at a rendezvous where the gathered beasts would be driven together and sorted out according to their brands. The range was nearly two hundred miles square, and was used by ten ranches for running their stock. Every inch of it was unfenced, so the herds often met and mixed. The eastern portion of this square consisted of plains, but the western part was much broken up by the spurs, valleys and gorges of the foothills of the Rockies.

Each ranch's men did their best to keep its animals as close as possible to its own buildings, but during the bitter storms of winter they scattered far and wide in search of better grazing and shelter. In the northern part, when blizzards swept down from the north-west, the cattle would drift down wind before the storms, feeding as they travelled. Sometimes great herds would march for hundreds of miles until halted by some natural obstacle.

It had been arranged that two of the Circle Triangle's outfits were to move due west, and then search the valleys and gorges, whilst the remaining two were to work the plains. Nos. 1 and 2 were the ones chosen for the hills, and they kept between twenty and thirty miles apart, a distance which would allow them to join if they were attacked by Indians.

It was not until the afternoon following the wagons' departure that the cowboys mounted and started off, each man with his cavvy, or string of horses, for the place where their wagon was due to halt for the night. As the men of No. 2 rode in, they found their wagon brought up near a stream. The cook was already busy with supper when Hugh, Bill and their mates rode in.

Each outfit consisted of ten cowboys and a cook, who was also the wagon-driver. The cook had no easy job; he had to make breakfast and supper for everybody, and a midday meal for any of the cowboys who happened to be near. On top of this he had to do the baking, wash-up, and split firewood for the cooking. Once or twice a week there was plum-duff to be made as a special treat, and the cook had to be up long before dawn, for the cowboys started off when the first glimpse of light showed in the eastern sky. As soon as breakfast was finished, everything had to be packed into the chuck-wagon, and the cook set out to drive to the evening halting-place, where he had to have his fires lighted and the supper well on its way by the time the

weary hands rode in, starving after a long day in the saddle.

Hugh rode Prince the first day, and found the horse spoiling for want of exercise, as he had done little work for weeks. When his master sat down in front of the camp-fire that night the conversation turned on whether a donkey or a horse had the more sense.

"The horses won't wander very far," said one cowboy, "since we've brought the white ass with us. There's nothing like a jack to keep horses quiet, for they seem to know that he has got loads more sense than they have. As long as the jack takes things quietly there's very little chance of the horses panicking."

"Do you mean to say that a donkey has more sense than a horse?" Hugh asked in amazement.

"He certainly has," said one of the crew. "So has a mule, for that matter."

The rest agreed, but Hugh said that he had always thought that horses despised donkeys.

"That's just where you're wrong, Hugh," said Bronco Harry, a tall, lanky cowboy. "Trust a jack to find the best forage and the nearest water. He'll manage to pick up a living where a horse'd starve, and he doesn't get scared and lose his head like a horse will. If there's a noise, he'll just cock up an ear and quietly make up his mind what it's all about, and then go on eating. A horse fidgets and sweats and is ready to bolt from his own shadow; besides, the horses know that the jack is their master."

"What do you mean?" asked Hugh, to whom all this was news. "D'you mean that a donkey can kick harder than a horse?"

"I don't say that he can kick harder, though a mule can—and twice as quickly—but a jack fights with his teeth, not his heels. I've seen many fights between stallions and jacks and the jack always wins. Why, I remember down at Red Springs, there was a great black stallion came along, leading a bunch of mares right into the valley where we were camped. He went for our horses and stampeded them down the gorge. We had a jack with us, but he paid no attention to the stallion, until His Nibs came at him, evidently thinking that he was going to kick his brains out with one blow. The jack went for him with his mouth open, dodged the kick, and then caught him by the neck. He hung on like a mastiff, though the stallion reared and plunged and lashed out like a mad thing. He lifted the jack off his feet several times, but each time he came down, still hanging on and with his feet stiff and well apart. He'd have killed that stallion if the mad brute hadn't torn itself away, leaving part of its hide in the jack's mouth, and run for his life. When he'd gone, the jack turned round as though nothing had happened, and went on feeding. Jacks don't get no manner of a chance in towns, but give 'em a free hand on the plains, and I tell you that they're just chokefull of sense. But it's getting dark, and I'm first for horse-guard, so I'll be moving."

The other three men who had been detailed for guard each brought in their horses, and picketed them handy, so that they would waste no time when their turn came.

Black Sam, the negro cook, struck up a tune on his accordion, and for the next couple of hours there was a sing-song round the camp-fire, after which all rolled themselves in their blankets, put their feet towards the fire, and, with their saddles as pillows, slept like logs until daybreak brought breakfast and the start of the next day's work, the first of the round-up proper.

By nightfall, when they rejoined the wagon at the new halting-place, they had collected sixty-odd cattle, at least a third of them calves trotting by their mothers' sides. Hugh had never seen cattle run with such amazing swiftness as did these beasts when the cowboys tried to herd them. They seemed to be more like stags than cows. Most of them were branded, but there were a few mavericks, animals bearing no distinguishing marks, amongst them. These had escaped the round-up of the previous year, and it was consequently impossible to make sure to which ranch they belonged. When they reached the wagon they were roped, thrown, and branded with the Circle Triangle, for the law of the range declared that finding was keeping, and that unbranded animals belonged to the outfit discovering them.

When darkness fell the herd was bunched down by the stream, while six cowboys were told off to ride night-herd, and three others, one of whom was Hugh, were detailed for horse-guard. He took first watch,

and as soon as he had finished his supper, John Colley, the foreman of No. 2 outfit, gave him his orders.

"Just keep near 'em, youngster," he said. "You can dismount if you like, and as long as they graze quietly, leave 'em alone, but if some start heading away, ride after them and head 'em back."

The horses were quiet enough, and when darkness had really fallen, Hugh was struck by the dead silence of the vast plains. The stars shone brightly in the dry, clear air as he stood watching the grazing animals, who made a surprising amount of sound in the stillness as they cropped the grass or occasionally stamped a hoof. He could hear in the distance the accordion and the cowboys' sing-song, but this died away after a time, leaving no other sound than the swish of the brushwood as the cattle forced their way through the scrub on the banks of the stream, or the cowboys' voices as they sang to quieten and reassure the feeding beasts. The time passed so quickly that Hugh was surprised when Bill Royce cantered up and told him that he was relieved.

Next day, soon after starting, Bronco Harry was riding close to Hugh, when they suddenly flushed a small herd of deer. Like a flash Bronco drew his Colt pistol and fired. One of the deer leaped convulsively into the air, ran a few yards and then dropped, while the rest disappeared like the wind.

"Gosh!" said Hugh, "that was a wonderful shot at such a range."

"Shucks," answered Bronco, with a grin. "A Colt will carry over four hundred yards, although they're not very accurate after the first hundred. I once saw a man killed at over three hundred, but I reckon that was a fluke. Up to a hundred, though, a man ain't much of a shot who can't bring down a running deer four times out of five. I don't mean hit 'em—you ought to be able to do that every time—but to bring 'em down, so that the poor beast don't get away, to die in agony."

Bronco Harry lashed the carcass to his saddle. "Venison makes a nice change from beef, though I think bear-meat's the finest eating in the world. I don't ask to put my teeth into anything better than a juicy bear-ham. Most things are eatable, though. I remember once having to live for a whole month on rattlers, and when you're desperate a rattler's not bad food."

"Are there a lot of them on the plains?" Hugh asked.

"Plenty," Bronco grunted. "Though you'll find 'em thickest up in the hills."

"I suppose lots of people get killed by them?"

"No. The Indians are scared of 'em because they go about barefoot, but you're safe enough in cow-boots. The main danger is one of the rattlers crawling into your blankets when you're asleep, for they dearly love warmth."

"There's not much hope for you if they happen to bite you, I suppose?" Hugh asked.

"They're not fatal once in fifty times if you treat yourself quickly. I certainly have known Mexicans killed by them, but then a Mexican just chucks up the sponge as soon as he feels himself in danger. If you happen to get bitten, Hugh, whip out your knife, grit your teeth, and cut the part clean out, if so be as you're struck on some part of your body that you can reach. Then clap on a poultice of fresh dung and tie a string tight round it. If you've got some spirits handy, pour some in just as soon as you've cut out the bit of flesh, and drink the rest of your supply. I was bit once. There. See?" and he pointed to a livid scar between the little finger and the wrist. "I pulled my gun, blew off the rattler's head, and then cut out the flesh all round the punctures. There wasn't any dung handy, so I broke open a cartridge, poured the powder into the hole I had made, and clapped a match to it. It hurt like the deuce, of course, because all the powder didn't flash off at once, but I was all right a few hours afterwards. Cattle and horses get bitten sometimes on the head when they're grazing, but they never die of it. No, there's no great danger from rattlers, but if you're in any place where they're thick it's just as well to take a good look round before you sit down."

They jogged along together in silence for a while, keeping a lookout for any straggling cattle. Hugh broke the quietness by asking:

"How did it happen that you lived on rattlers for a month, Bronco?"

“Indians!” snorted the cowboy. “I was on a ranch way up north from here, and I had been looking after a bunch of cows that had wandered up a canyon, when I saw a party of Indians riding my way. Lucky I sighted them before they did me, and I lost no time in clearing out at the gallop. A little way up the canyon I slid off the horse, turned his head up it, and sent him on his way as hard as he could go, whilst I took cover amongst the rocks.

“Presently the Indians came along, no doubt looking for cattle. I heard them pass by my hiding-place, and then they came rushing back again so quickly that I knew they had happened on my horse. For the next two days they hunted for me, but I had worked my way down pretty deep amongst the fallen boulders, and they didn’t find me. I’d been in too much of a hurry trying to save my hair as I crept into the hole to worry about rattlers, but I had noticed what a lot of them there were lying about on the rocks sunning themselves. You can bet your bottom dollar that I started thinking a great deal about ’em when I had reached safety and was lying at the bottom of that hole. I had my pistol and knife with me, but the gun was no good, as a single shot would have cost me my scalp, and a knife ain’t quite the best weapon for a tussle with a rattler.

“I could’ve shifted when night fell, but I reckoned that I’d got as good a place as any other, and I was scared of putting my feet in a nest of rattlers in the dark, so I lay where I was all that night and the next

day. I slept a bit at night, but I had to keep my eyes and ears wide open during the day. I could hear the Indians moving about and thrusting their long lances down into the holes amongst the rocks. Luckily the place I was in was just at the foot of the cliffs, and you couldn't tell that there was a hole there unless you climbed some way up.

"When night came again I guessed that they would give up searching and take to watching. I climbed out, forgetting all about rattlers, and went a good bit higher up the gorge. I was nearly mad with thirst, and there warn't no water, as I knew perfectly well, within a hundred miles. I felt sure that the Indians wouldn't come up the valley again, which was what we call a box-canyon, steep sides and a blind end, with no other way out than the one by which you entered, but that they would keep watch at the mouth.

"Soon as it was light I cut a stoutish stick, tore a strip from my sash and lashed my knife on to its end. Then I hid again, but I chose a place from which I could look out. About ten o'clock there was still no sign of Indians, and the sun was beating down so that it seemed to frizzle my brains, and I guessed that the rattlers would be out looking for the warmth. I grew so bad with thirst that if I had seen the Indians I should have come out, to get one drink before I died.

"I didn't have to hunt very far; before I'd gone five yards I saw a rattler lying on a rock not five yards away. I ought to have told you, Hugh, that there's

two kinds of rattlers, the plain and the rock sorts. The rock ain't so big as the plain, but his bite's just as bad. Mr. Snake saw me coming, but he didn't take no trouble to move. Too comfortable in the sun, I guess. He just sounded his rattles as though to warn me off. When I got nearer to him he lifted his head a little higher as he got madder, and I made one swish at him and knocked his head clean off. I picked him up, went back into my hiding-place, skinned him, cut him up into chunks and ate him just as he was.

"That was the first of 'em, and I had three or four more before that day was finished. The next two days I filled my larder and then crawled down to the mouth of the canyon, and just where it narrowed I could hear the Indians talking. Back I went again, for they were too wary to light a fire, and I could not tell how many of the brutes there were. I reckoned that they might come back up the valley next morning, so I hid myself in my first den, and it was mighty lucky that I did, for they came all right, about a dozen of 'em, and spent the whole day searching for me.

"I crawled down again that night, but I heard no voices. I went on until I was well out on the plain, but I found that they'd gone. That was just what I had expected. They had captured my water-skins with my horse, and they knew that nobody could stand four days drought in that heat without dying or going off his head, and they thought that I had crawled into some hole, stuck there, and died. Their own water

must have been running short, and they had been forced to pull out before thirst struck them as well.

"I wasn't much better off than I was before, for they'd driven off the cattle, and it was hopeless to think of trying to walk a hundred miles without water. I had found that there was juice enough in the rattlers, and in some of the leaves round about, to keep me going, so I made up my mind that there was nothing to be done except to stay put until some of my mates came out to look for me.

"I didn't mind so much now that I could light a fire, for I was getting pretty sick of raw rattler. I lit one next morning right up at the head of the canyon, choosing a place where I could throw a stone over the ashes in case any more Indians took it into their heads to pay me a visit. Every morning I cooked enough rattlers for the day, and then took them down and sat amongst some bushes down at the valley-mouth, so that I could see anyone coming across the levels. I had hopes that a deer, or a bear, or a head or two of cattle might show up and give me a real feed, but not one did I see, though I stayed there a month.

"At last, one morning, I saw four cowboys coming towards me. I tracked out to meet 'em, and found that they were some of my own outfit a-looking for me. That was how I come to live on rattlers for a month, and believe me, I ain't been able to look at 'em since."

"A mighty near call, Bronco!" said Hugh. "Do people often get lost on the plains and die?"

"Lots of 'em, tenderfeet mostly, seldom an old hand," replied Bronco. "A cowboy knows which way to go without having to use marks. Stars at night and sun during the day are all the guides he needs. But tenderfeet often go missing—they panic when they find that they're lost, and once that happens they're finished, unless someone happens to come along and find 'em. They go out of their mind the same day, as a rule; run about, drop, run again, drop once more, and so on, until they're too exhausted to go on living. Take my tip, Hugh, be mighty careful if ever you come on a man who's still alive after being lost a couple of days. He'll be stark, raving mad, and is as like to pull a gun on you as not. Happened to me once. I had to shoot him in the legs before I could get near him, but I saved his life. Hullo, what's that?" reining back his horse suddenly. "Look's like a big bunch of cattle up in that draw. We'll work round and come at them from the other side, so's we'll have 'em headed in the right direction."

"I can't see 'em," said Hugh, straining his eyes. Bronco pointed them out to him. "Come on, get moving," said the cowboy. "You go round to the right, and stop when you think you're behind 'em. I'll work round to the left. As soon as you see me coming towards them on the other side, ride forward and keep on their flank. The draw runs in the direction of the camp, so let's move straight down it."

A few minutes after he had reached his position

Hugh saw Bronco Harry come swooping out on the far side of the herd of grazing cattle, whooping and waving his hat. For a moment the animals stood, heads aloft, quivering with alarm, and then they took to their heels and raced down the draw. For three miles their flight never slackened as the two cowboys rode on either side of them, but for the last two miles into camp they fell into a walk and in an hour reached the wagon.

"No more need to bother about them," said Bronco Harry dismounting. "They'll work their way down to the stream, have a drink and lie down in the shade of the bushes, until they meet up with the other cattle."

Black Sam was delighted with the deer. The work of the two men was over for the day, and, as soon as they had eaten the meal set before them, and seen that the cattle were quiet, they took advantage of their spare time by going down to the stream and washing their shirts and clothes, for every leisure second is valuable during round-up.

After this, they had a little pistol-practice, and Bronco Harry stood amazed at the lightning speed of Hugh's draw. He rather prided himself on the quickness of his own draw and insisted upon trying it, both with empty guns, against Hugh's. Before Bronco's own gun had cleared its holster, Hugh's hammer had fallen. Bronco laughed, a bit nervously.

"Well, you're one man I shan't try to mix it with in a gun-fight," he said. "I'd be a dead man if we'd

been having a quarrel. I've been ten years on the plains, but I'm hanged if I've ever seen anything like that draw of yours. By Jupiter, Hugh, if you get into a mess with the worst bad man in Texas, you'll come out on top. I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't seen it for myself. Say, I'm going to tell the boys. It'll only be fair to warn them to lay off you if they don't want to commit suicide."

"You'll make my head swell," Hugh laughed. "But I don't think that there's much chance of my having a serious row with any of the fellows of our outfit."

"That's so, youngster," agreed Bronco, "but a bit of a warning won't do any harm. Folks aren't so likely to quarrel when they know what they're up against, but tempers get short when men are thrown too much together and have no outside interests. When we have sleepless nights with stampeding cattle, and when we get farther south and meet Mexican villages where there's drink, quarrels will start. I tell you, lad, you don't know anything about a cow-puncher's life yet."

Bronco told the rest of the outfit that night, and they insisted upon a display of Hugh's skill. He gave it, with no wish to show off, and a silence fell upon the others when they had seen for themselves what he could do. For a while they sat round the fire telling yarns of marvellous shooting they had seen, and from that evening Hugh found that his nickname amongst his mates was "Lightning", a name by which they always addressed him.

CHAPTER IX

Round-up

Day by day the herd swelled, and by the end of two months it was so large that the cowboys began to move towards the general rendezvous. Hugh had taken his full share of the work, and generally found himself partnering Bronco Harry. The first watch at night was the one preferred, because this allowed a man to have a fair night's rest when he had finished his turn of duty, though the work was then much harder than in the later watches. The cattle were still on their feet when the watch began, and the two guards had to keep riding round and round, going in opposite directions.

For a time the cattle would keep on feeding, then, gradually, they would settle down for the night, until all but a very few would be lying down. The slightest noise, however, brought them to their feet again; small groups would try to break away from the main body, to start feeding once more, and the cowboys had to work hard to drive them together again. On dark nights they depended upon the wonderful eyesight of the horses, for these would turn like sheep-

dogs, and, of their own accord, drive in any straying cows.

After an hour or two the huge herd generally settled, and the cowboys would flatter themselves that their work was done. Then one of the beasts on the outside of the packed circle might jump suddenly to its feet, bellowing in fright, scared perhaps by a jack-rabbit. With a loud snorting the whole herd rose, perhaps, with luck, to settle again, reassured by the singing of the night-guard. The cowboys sung to their charges, or played a flute or guitar, which acted as well as the human voice.

Sometimes a general alarm surged through the herd. Those on the outside, finding it impossible to break away, would begin to move along the edge, the movement spreading rapidly until, in a few minutes, the whole vast mass would be circling, or "weaving", as the cowboys called it. Unless this was checked pretty smartly, a general stampede followed. It could be stopped only by riding into the lumbering, frightened mass of trampling bodies and tossing horns, and there freely using heavy whips. Such an expedient was highly dangerous, not only because of the pressure of heavy bodies, but also because of the sea of restless horned heads.

On such occasions the cowboys were lucky sometimes, but often they failed. From the side opposite from that on which they were working desperately to break up the weaving, there would come a sudden

thunder of hoofs, a lowing and a bellowing which filled the night with terror. Every cowboy in the camp rushed to saddle-up and gallop madly towards the herd, when the roaring shout "They're off!" was raised by the herdsman.

At full gallop all hands would dash towards the cattle, yelling and shouting at the pitch of their voices, and firing their pistols as they pressed on the flanks of the terror-stricken mass, gradually checking its headlong speed until they had headed the mob. If they were lucky they could stop the stampede within a few miles, but many times they had to travel as much as thirty before they succeeded.

If they were unable to head off the animals, the great aim of the cowboys was to keep them together in one body, and in that case no great harm followed a stampede. In the morning they were easily able to drive them back to their grazing-ground. But if it happened that the herd split up and scattered all over the country, several days elapsed before it could be fully rounded-up.

Stormy nights were their greatest enemy, and then extra men had to ride herd. One of them rode in a circle, far wide of the grazing animals, keeping a watchful eye open for the first attempt to break the circle. If that attempt were made, his duty was to dash for the camp and give the alarm. There were many thunderstorms, and when the great, jagged flames of lightning commenced to play, everyone knew that

there would be precious little sleep for the camp. Hugh was often glad of the movement and excitement, for he had never dreamed that electrical storms could be so savage as those he encountered in Texas. The thunder was continuous, like the drum-fire of heavy artillery, while the lightning kept the whole countryside in the plainest view, lit up by the vivid and horrible glare. On such nights it was almost certain that the cattle would stampede, and once they started, all the efforts of the cowboys were concentrated on keeping them together, for to head the terror-stricken beasts was impossible.

The wild rides to head or hold the herd, in the midst of the flashing lightning, and to the tune of the crashing thunder, were the most thrilling experiences of Hugh's life. A fall, when he was riding in front of the cattle charging madly behind him, would have meant a horrible death, trampled into the blood-stained grass by thousands of hoofs. To be overtaken by the herd meant an even swifter end, crushed by the heaving bodies or gored by the tossing horns. In some ways a stampede on a night of electric storm was safer than that on a quiet night, for, at least, he could see the herd, and there was less chance of a heavy fall when the pitfalls and holes could be seen so clearly by the continual flashing of the lightning.

He began to see that even twelve horses were not too many for a single cowboy. The horses were wiry and tough, but a cowboy had to be iron itself to stand

the life. Often he was eighteen hours continuously in the saddle, and once or twice over twenty, and five horses would be exhausted by such a day. If there had been grain to feed them they might have had more stamina, but cow-ponies never ate anything but the dry grasses of the plains, and needed a day's rest before they were again fit for work.

By the time they reached the rendezvous where all the different outfits and ranches had agreed to meet for the round-up, their own herd had increased by another thousand head. When they finally arrived at the stream where several other herds were waiting for them and the remainder to come in, horse, man and beast were exhausted, and four days rest were ordered before the real hard work started. The men used those days to the full, washing and repairing clothes, fixing broken saddlery, and making up their arrears of sleep.

The cowboys were a strange people, as free and independent as the air. Never, in any circumstances, would they take an order, but they would obey every suggestion or wish of the bosses and foremen so long as they were made in the form of a request.

"Bronco Harry," said their foreman, on the fifth day after their arrival, "I wish that you, Johnson, Bowie Bob, Chunky Royce, and Lightning would saddle up and ride down to the forks for the round-up. The rest will stay here until our herd is called up. The wagon is staying here with us, but the boss will

settle for you down there. I'd like you to stay there a fortnight, and then I'll ask some of the others to come down and give you a spell."

"Shall we take down all our horses?" Bronco asked.

"No, No. I outfit'll take charge of the cattle until they're cut out and branded. You'll only need horses to carry you down to the forks."

"Right," said Bronco, and called the other four cowboys together. In a few minutes, with their blankets and kits strapped to their saddles, they started off for the forks, which lay twenty-five miles away, as the vast herds had to be kept at a distance from each other to allow for grazing during the weeks of the round-up.

"Now you'll see some fun, Hugh," said Bill Royce, who had got the name of "Chunky" because of his squat figure.

"Yes, Lightning," agreed Bronco; "I guess that you'll have to keep your eyes skinned and move powerful fast. It's some job when you're wrestling with a six-months calf, and its mother's doing her best to hook you with her horns. There ain't a day when some fellow don't get hurt, but so long as you don't let an old cow get you jammed against the posts you'll be all right. That's the one thing you've got to watch. A straightforward toss in the air don't much matter, nor being kicked a dozen yards or so, but if you get jammed by one of those brutes you'll be chief mourner at your own planting-party."

At the forks there were several large herds of cattle, and a large number of horsemen were hovering round them, whilst, in the centre, was a mob of cattle enclosing a strong palisade. Twelve wagons were drawn up in a regular line, about fifty yards apart, and smoke rising near each of them told that the cooks were busy. Bronco waved his hand for a halt as they reached the Circle Triangle wagon, and asked the negro cook where the rest of the outfit were.

"Over dere," said the grinning black man, pointing towards the herd. "Some's wid the cattle, the others in the corral. Irish is in the wagon wid his leg broken, and New York Johnnie was planted three days ago."

"Sorry to hear that, Pete," answered Bronco. "How come?"

"Old cow hooked him and then jammed him 'gainst the posts," Pete replied.

"Anyone down from the other outfits yet, Pete?"

"Yes, five No. 3, five No. 4. No. 4 came in dis mawnin'. Now you guys have come in, and dat makes fifteen; too many for Pete to do the cooking for," grumbled the cheery negro.

"Well, you've got that Mex to help you," grunted Bronco. "You're a great fellow for a grumble, Pete."

"Help me? That Mex!" Pete spat and groaned. Then he turned back to his work with his face screwed up in disgust, for negro and Mexican hate each other with a bitter scorn, and very seldom work together.

Pete asked where the horses were picketed, and then

Hugh rode over on Prince, leading the other four animals. He found a fifteen-year-old lad, Nat, guarding the horses of the Circle Triangle. He was lying on the ground, with his horses' reins looped over his arm.

"How are things, Nat?" Hugh asked, as he turned loose his led horses, from which the saddles had been removed before their owners had handed them over to him.

"Dash all camps, is what I say," snorted Nat. "I've been here a week and had nothing else to do but horse-guard."

"You ought to be at school, you young chump," Hugh grinned.

"I might as well be doing that as lying here," the boy said bitterly. "They all treat me as a kid, and stick me on this job because they think they're keeping me out of danger, and, believe me, there ain't much fun in looking after a bunch of horses. Just come in?" he ended, altering his tone.

"Yes."

"Who's with you?"

Hugh gave him the names.

"Bronco's a good sort," said Nat. "The rest ain't much."

"You'd better tell 'em so," Hugh grinned, as he stripped the saddle off Prince.

"I'd do so if I thought fit," Nat snapped. "D'you think I'm scared of 'em?"

"No, I know you're a tough hombre," Hugh agreed solemnly. "But don't go doing 'em any harm."

"I won't so long as they leave me alone," said Nat; "but I'll take no lip from anyone."

Hugh nodded to the lad, and then, with Prince's saddle over his head, started back for the wagon. There were many lads like Nat amongst the cow-ranches, training to be cowboys, and used for day-guard on the horses, work that needed little skill or attention. They were the favourites of their outfits, but these youngsters generally grew up to be the wildest and most dare-devil men in the country, hard riders and tough fighters.

At nightfall work for the day ceased, and the tired men gathered round their own fires to yarn and sing.

"Never seen the cattle so wild," said one man. "Too many thunderstorms, I reckon, and we found signs that the Indians had been chasing some of them. Did your outfit see anything of the Reds?"

"Nary a sign in our bit of country," Bronco answered.

"Plenty of tracks farther south," the other went on. "We found some places where they'd slaughtered a lot of cattle, and they've been raiding over the border; the Mexican troops are out after 'em. You heard that New York John was rubbed out, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Bronco. "How'd it happen?"

"Holding a calf, and he had his eye on the old cow, who'd got her dander properly up. One of the boys

had her roped, and New York naturally thought he was safe, so he downed the calf and the brand was clapped on. The calf let out one bawl, the cow made a fresh rush, and then the rope breaks and she was on to New York John afore he could look round."

"He must've been mad to start on round-up with a rotten old rope," put in Bill Royce.

"That's just it," said the other slowly. "The rope was a new one; some swine had cut it half way through. Wish we knew who done it, so's we could string him up by the neck, but we don't, and I 'spose we never shall."

"What's on to-morrow?" asked Bronco to break the silence that followed.

"Your lot are for the corral," answered the cowboy. "My outfit's having a spell off to look after our own bunch of cows."

Next morning Hugh went down to the cattle-yard, or corral, as soon as day broke and breakfast was finished. He had a good look round before the cattle were driven in and the work started. The corral was surrounded by a paling of very strong six-foot posts, placed about three inches apart, built four years before. This was the most convenient location for all the surrounding ranches using the great strip of range, and the enclosed space was just over an acre in extent.

Beside the boys from the Circle Triangle there were between forty and fifty hands in the corral, all from other ranches. Each party lit a fire to heat the branding irons, and the foreman who was in charge for the

day divided the men into different working-parties, each group having a representative from every ranch taking part in the round-up. In a few minutes a large herd came rushing towards the gate, driven along by some mounted cowboys; when several hundred had entered, the cross-bars were lowered, the animals standing in a dense group, stamping the ground and threatening an attack upon the cowboys as they approached them.

Every man was carrying his rope in his left hand, whilst he grasped a heavy whip in his right. Those who were to fetch out the calves walked in front to clear a way—half a dozen ropes were thrown, and the calves were dragged out, struggling and bawling wildly for assistance. Their mothers dashed out furiously to the rescue. As they did so, the cowboys dragging the calves called out the brand of the mother, and others kept her off whilst the younger beast was taken to the fire. There the calf was thrown and it was branded with the same mark as its mother.

Hugh was amongst those who were bringing out the calves. He had had some practice, as many of the mavericks they had found during the journey had had calves by their sides, and both mother and offspring had had to be marked with the Circle Triangle. Another cowboy helped him to drag the calf he had secured towards the branding fire, and held the rope whilst Hugh ran up to the struggling youngster. He placed himself alongside it, leaned over, grasped it by the

flank with both hands, and then lifted and flung it over upon its side. His partner pinned its head to the ground, whilst Hugh knelt on its haunches as the brander marked it with his hot iron. The iron was held against its side only long enough to burn off the hair and slightly singe the hide, but it made a mark that was almost indelible.

The animal's ears were then vented, each ranch having its own particular mark, such as two long slits and a short one, or a square piece cut out and a notch on either side of it. Even those marks, however, often got confused through the animals getting their ears torn as they rushed through thorn-scrub, or by a neighbour's horn during a stampede.

It did not require much strength to throw a calf of three months; but many of them were nine months old or nearly full grown, and it needed tremendous exertion and a lot of knack to do the job properly when throwing a beast of this size. Once or twice Hugh had the narrowest of escapes, for some of the cows, savage with the treatment given their calves, dashed past the cowboys' whips to the rescue, and to punish the man who, they thought, was ill-treating their youngsters. Luckily each time that it happened, lassoes snaked out and threw the enraged mothers before they could reach him.

An hour of this heavy labour, and Hugh was replaced and went to do his share in the lighter task of keeping back the cows, before he returned once more to the job

of cutting out the calves for branding. By nightfall over nine thousand animals had passed through the corral, whilst nearly four thousand calves had been branded, and Hugh felt that he had not an unstrained muscle nor an unbroken bone in his body. He was better, however, after a good tuck-in at Black Pete's warm supper, and a wash down in the cool waters of the creek.

Day after day the work went on, and there were plenty of quarrels amongst the cowboys over the brands of some of the older cows, but when these happened the foreman would call three of the hands, men not connected with the two ranches disputing the brands. Their decision was final, and on many occasions it prevented the angry drawing of guns.

On Sundays they arranged the greatest excitement the cowboys had—races between fancied horses, and most of them bet their last dollars on the results.

"What about trying that roan of yours, Lightning?" one of his outfit asked him one day.

"Prince is pretty fast," Hugh answered, "but I've never really tried him out against another animal."

"No better time than now," broke in Bronco Harry. "We've been fools not to do it before, as I reckon he could beat any horse in this round-up. What about seeing what he can do, Lightning?"

The outfit did so that afternoon, and whistled at the result. Bronco's horse was supposed to be one of the best on the plains, and could actually beat Prince over

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a short distance, mainly because he had been trained to get off the mark instantly, but, at anything over quarter of a mile, Prince left him standing, despite the fact that his rider was twenty pounds heavier than Bronco Harry.

“ We’ll keep this under our hats, compadres,” said Bronco to the rest. “ We’ll fix up a match with that man in the Cross-T outfit, and see if we can’t make up some of our losses.”

Hugh hated the idea of betting; he always had done so, but there was nothing he could do to restrain the enthusiasm of the other men in his outfit, and he said no more after making his one protest against wagering. All that week work went on in the cattle-yard, but the men of the Circle Triangle grinned quietly to themselves when they thought of the race fixed up for the Sunday that was coming.

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CHAPTER X

A Race

"Look here, Bronco," said Hugh one evening, "I don't like the idea of the lads staking every cent they own on Prince. Over a long distance I think he could beat anything, but I'm not at all happy about a short race. What about calling the whole thing off?"

"He's your horse, Lightning," said Bronco, "but the boys are going to be powerful disappointed if you scratch him. We'd like to see that blow-hard Cross-T puncher beaten. He's always boasting about what he can do. He fancies himself as a gunman, too, and he's supposed to be pretty handy with a six-shooter."

On the Sunday morning the Cross-T punchers walked over to the Circle-Triangle wagon. "You've got a pretty punk-looking string of horses in this here outfit," said the gunman with a sneer. "I've heard a lot about some spavined roan or other that your crowd rather fancies."

Bronco Harry and the cowboys were instantly on their guard. They were quite sure that Hugh would race his horse now after this insult, but they had to decry Prince's qualities if they were to get decent odds on their bet.

"That's the animal over there," said Bronco pointing; "but he's a sight better looking than he really is. Sort of slow in starting, and that critter of yours is a might too speedy for the roan to catch him in a quarter of a mile. If you care to make it a bit longer distance, we'll race you."

"I don't care about half a mile," said the man. "Suppose we split the difference? Or, if you fancy your chance, what about making it ten miles out and back, each side to put down two hundred dollars?"

"What d'you say to that, Lightning?" asked Bronco.

"Nothing doing," grunted Hugh. "But if you like to take the shorter distance, you can ride Prince against him."

"Oh, it's your horse, is it?" snapped the Cross-T hand. "Why not ride him yourself?"

"Because I'm two stone heavier than you are," Hugh answered. "If Prince is going to race he may as well have some sort of a chance."

After further talk the race was fixed for five that evening, and some of the men marked out a distance of seven hundred yards. Bronco's neckerchief on a staff was stuck up as a winning-post, while a low bush marked the starting line. By the time that five o'clock came round, everyone in the round-up had turned up to see what would happen. After several other races had taken place, Prince and the Cross-T horse were led up to the starting-bush, where both riders stripped

themselves of their heavy gear, and even took off their riding-boots.

"Shake him up to begin with, Bronco," Hugh said. "He'll be all right afterwards. He just can't stand being passed, and when the other fellow leaves him, he'll go all out."

A foreman from a neutral ranch had been chosen to act as starter. He told them that he would walk about thirty yards down the course to a point in sight of both riders. There he would fire his six-gun as the signal to start. "Keep your eyes on him, Bronco," said one of the Circle-Triangle boys. "Get going when you see the flash; don't wait for the report."

As the starter went off, both men were in the saddle with their spurs fastened to their stockinged heels, and, as the pistol flashed, Bronco Harry brought his quirt down on Prince's quarters. He was not used to this sort of treatment, and in sheer surprise bounded off the mark and started away at a stretch gallop. But the Cross-T animal was away even quicker. Well trained, it had had its legs bunched under it waiting for the signal, and was instantly off the mark. But it did not gain more than a length from Prince, and for the first three hundred yards the two horses kept their positions—Prince chafing against his bridle; his rider, shouting and yelling, but holding him in.

The Cross-T man, thinking that Prince was doing his uttermost, and feeling certain that he had the race well in hand, struck home with his spurs, and in a few

seconds his animal had gained another length, but Bronco Harry eased up on Prince's head, and by the time that another hundred yards had passed, his head was level with the other's stirrup. The Cross-T man whipped and spurred, whilst Bronco sat quiet, contenting himself with holding his position. Then—one hundred yards from home, he shook up his mount and touched him lightly with the spur. Instantaneously Prince was level with his opponent and flashed past the winning post three lengths in the lead.

The Circle-Triangle outfits went nearly mad with enthusiasm, whilst the loser said never a word, but turned and rode back to his wagon, whilst the cowboys collected the bag of 250 dollars from the stake-holder.

"You'll have trouble with that skunk, Lightning," said Bronco Harry that evening. "He's dropped a lot of money, but the point that'll rile him is being beaten. You just watch and see if he don't start something."

"Let him," said Hugh. "If he does, I want you boys to remember that he's my meat."

"Nothing doin', Lightning," snapped Bronco. "I rode the race, and if he's looking for a row he can find it right here with me. I guess he'll try and make trouble with you, because he knows that you're a tenderfoot, and he believes that I am a fairly tough handful. A guy like him always tries to fix a quarrel on someone he thinks easy."

"Listen, Bronco," said Hugh, very, very quietly; "I can look after myself. If he wants to fix a quarrel

on me I want you to leave us alone. I can manage him without having to shoot."

"I don't like it," Bronco answered, "but if you insist upon it——"

"I do," Hugh replied.

However, nothing happened that evening. "He daren't start anything to-night," Long Tom said, after they had waited some time for him. "He'd have the whole camp agin him if he did. If he was to come down here and someone got shot," and the lanky puncher glanced over towards Hugh; "he knows that the boys wouldn't stand for it, and he'd have to face old Judge Lynch and a rope. I reckon that that no-account cow-poke's got Mexican blood, and a Mex'll wait for months to get his own back."

"That's so," said Bronco, "a greaser's just about the lowest kind of white there is. That is, if you can call 'em white. Personally, I hate 'em more than I do Injuns."

The next morning half of No. 1 outfit started north with a herd of five thousand cattle that had been picked out from those driven and branded; while Hugh and his mates took their turn at driving into the stockyard those still to be marked with the hot irons. This was much more to his taste than the earlier work had been, and he thoroughly enjoyed himself. He did not mind the heavy task of hauling in and throwing the calves, but the sight and stench of the branding operation had sickened him. It was most necessary

work, of course, but it was a brutal sort of task in which to have to share.

The herding, on the other hand, was good fun. The cattle seemed to have an instinctive dislike of the stockyard. Many of them had been branded there in previous years and probably recognized it again. There were constant attempts to break away, and it needed the best effort of the herders to drive them down to the yard, and still more to keep them there till their turn came to be admitted. As the animals came out, too, the calves were half-mad with pain and terror, the cows, furious at what had been done to their young; to pick out the cattle bearing a given ranch's brand and drive them off to their own herds, was dangerous work.

The cows often made furious charges which it took all the agility of man and horse to evade. As the cow dashed furiously past it had to be roped and thrown, by way of a lesson, and to take the fight out of it. When the rope was slackened the beast would rise dazedly to its feet and lurch heavily away, cured of its desire for murder. At midday the rest of No. 2 outfit arrived with the wagon, and Hugh galloped off on Prince, roped one of his own horses, saddled-up, and returned to his work, glad to give the roan a rest.

Some of the bulls gave a deal of trouble, charging furiously as they came out of the corral. Three or four cowboys had to unite on these occasions, and while one attracted the angry animal's attention, the rest

threw their ropes; but some of the great maddened beasts had to be thrown half a dozen times before they were subdued.

A few days after the race, Flash Bill, as the Cross-T man was called, strolled aggressively up to the fire round which the cowboys of No. 2 outfit were sitting.

"I've come over to say that I'm sorry I rode off that day you beat me, Bronco," he growled surlily. "I allow that it was a mean thing to have done. I was riled pretty considerable; still I oughtn't ter have done it; it wurn't the right thing."

"It sure wurn't," Bronco agreed; "but there's an end of it. Sit right down and have a smoke."

For some time the talk ran on horses, while a few other men of the Cross-T sauntered up and joined in. After a while Flash Bill turned to Hugh and said:

"Any idea of trading that roan of yours?" he asked.

"No. I wouldn't sell him at any price," Hugh answered. "He suits me and I'd never get another half as good."

"Seems to me that I've seen that there horse before," said Flash Bill. "Had him long?"

"About eight months."

"Curious; I seem to know him. Can't think where I've seen him afore. Maybe out West."

"I bought him at M'Kinney," Hugh answered.

"Huh! Bought him, did yer?" sneered Flash Bill.

"How else did you think I'd get him?" Hugh asked quietly.

"Plenty of horses on the plains that was never paid for."

"You should know," replied Hugh.

"Meaning?" and Flash Bill's voice grew as hard and cold as chilled steel.

"Whatever you like to make of it."

"Say, are you meaning to imply that I'm a horse-thief?"

"I meant just what I said," Hugh remarked coolly.

"Then you're a liar," and Flash Bill's hand streaked to his hip. Before his fingers had closed on the butt of his pistol he found himself looking down the tunnel-mouth of Hugh's six-gun, with a pair of unwinking eyes staring at him above it.

"Drop it," snapped Hugh, his voice as deadly as a sword-point; "or I'll drill you." Flash Bill's hand drew quickly away from his gun, the fear of instant destruction shining on his sweat-streaked face.

"Now take back that insult," Hugh snapped. "Eat your words."

"I take it back," Flash Bill answered, all the fight frightened out of him. "You've got the drop on me, though how you done it licks creation. There ain't nothing more to be said. I eats what I said."

"Then there's an end of it," said Hugh with a smile, and thrust his revolver back into its holster. "Don't be always too cocksure that you're on to a soft thing, Flash Bill, or you might slip up worse than you've done this time."

"You'd best beat it out of camp, Flash," said Bronco Harry. "You ain't wanted here. You came over to make a muss; thought you'd got hold of a tenderfoot to murder. If we hadn't known Lightning, and his draw, we'd have chipped in before. Guess you ain't required any more after backing down to a tenderfoot."

With a muffled curse, Flash Bill lurched up, and, followed by the rest of the Cross-T outfit, went off into the darkness.

"You did mighty well, Lightning," said Bronco; "but you're a young fool for all that. The law of the plains is that if one man calls another a liar, them's fighting words, and the first to draw kills the other. That's right, ain't it, boys?"

"Sure is," they chorussed.

"You can call a man mighty near anything else except a liar or a coward. We ain't choice about the names we hand out, but those two words is sudden death. You ought to have shot him, for you'll have trouble with him some other day."

"But I couldn't," Hugh protested. "Hang it all, he was practically unarmed."

"He'd have killed you if you had not been so tar-nation swift on the draw, and there isn't a man in camp who would've blamed ye if you'd drilled his ugly carcass, for it's certain sure that he came over here with the single purpose of picking a row with you and then killing you. We know a lot about Flash Bill; his

reputation as a killer, rustler and horse-thief stinks. I guess that he's only here just now because he's made the settlements too hot to hold him."

Next morning as they were saddling-up, Flash Bill rode past. He had his blankets and kit strapped to his saddle. He reined in as he passed. "I give you fair warning," he snarled at Hugh; "that the next time you see me you'd better come with your guns a-smoking, for I'll shoot on sight. That goes for you, too, Bronco Harry."

"O.K.," Bronco replied. "That stands for us. You'd best beat it and get a few lessons in how to handle that gun of yours, Flash."

Hugh found himself quite popular in the camp, after having made so tough a gunman as Flash Bill eat his own words. He was not sorry, however, when word came for No. 2 outfit to start back for the Circle-Triangle with a herd of nine thousand head, and he left the round-up camp with few regrets. In any case, the work was nearly finished when his outfit rode off.

"Been a pretty good round-up," said Bronco Harry as they rode beside the herd. "Only four men killed by the cattle and five shooting-scrapes. That's right, only five men shot during the whole time."

"That's five too many," answered Hugh, as he rode beside him.

"'Spose that it is," Bronco agreed. "But, then we'd never get along out here without some shooting. There ain't no law, no sheriffs, no police and no troops

on the range, so how in tarnation would we keep order if it weren't for the six-gun? There'd be no peace, and the men'd be for ever wrangling and bickering. How'd you work it out, anyhow? It is just because a quarrel may mean a shooting that everyone keeps a civil tongue. There's no place in the world where there's so little quarrelling as on the plains. If we didn't all carry guns and were ready to use 'em, any bunch of toughs would have it all their own way. Big fellows like you, Lightning, could bully runts like me. We should get all the bad men from the towns just as soon as they'd made the settlements too hot to hold 'em. There'd be murderers, and gamblers, and thieves, and worse coming and mixing themselves up with us.

"Without the revolver, Hugh, there'd be no living out here. No, sirree, the six-gun puts all men on a level, and everyone's got to respect the other. I don't say that there ain't a lot wiped out every year, because there is, but I do say that it's better so than if we were without the gun. When these plains get settled up in the years ahead, when the great ranches go and the grangers and nesters have their little farms on our range, there'll be judges and sheriffs, police and law, and the six-shooter's day will be done. But we can't do without it until then. The revolver is our sheriff, and judge and executioner all rolled into one. No one who is quiet and peaceable has much occasion to use it."

"Dash it all, man," protested Hugh; "I'm quiet and peaceable enough, but I darned near had to use mine only the other day."

Bronco grinned. "I know that you were dead in the right, Lightning," he said; "but Flash Bill came over to get up a quarrel with you, and if you had been as peaceable and quiet as you say, you'd have just knuckled down and let him ride over you. Nothing could have *made* you take up a quarrel with him. Supposing that you'd said, all quiet and peaceable like, that you had a receipt for Prince, witnessed by the sheriff and citizens of M'Kinney, he couldn't have driven you to fight."

Hugh laughed, but still said that he reckoned the West would be better without Colts' justice.

"Say, Hugh, there was a fellow out here not so long ago, who said that it weren't so very long ago since every man in Europe carried a sword and was always fighting duels, until the government got strong enough to make laws that it could enforce. Once the law's strong enough out here, the six-gun will go, too, but that won't be for a long time yet.

"If it weren't for us cowboys there'd be no living in the settlements along the borders. Horse-thieves and outlaws would rampage about just as they chose, terrorizing the farmers and their wives and kiddies. But the bad men know if they get too bad that a party of cowboys will follow them across the continent if necessary, until they've wiped them out. Then, again,

who keeps the Injuns in order? Do you think that it's Uncle Sam's troops? The Reds just laugh at 'em, but they don't do no smiling at the cowboys."

"It ain't so long," said Long Tom, who had ridden up and joined them, "since a big boss came out here from Washington to make peace talk with the tribes. He asked them what they would like the Government to give them as a present. One of the chiefs said that they'd appreciate a few cannons and some ammunition."

"'But', said the commissioner, 'we can't give you cannon to use against our troops'."

"The chief laughed at him. 'Who's worrying about your troops?' he asked. 'We want the cannon to fight the cowboys,'" and Long Tom chuckled.

"That chief knew what was what," Bronco Harry agreed. "It is the cowboys who keep back the Redskins. It's us as stops these plains from getting filled with bad characters, and the cowboys can only do this because each rider has got six men's lives in his belt, and because he doesn't value his own life over greatly. Death's too near us all the time to let us worry. We know that we can't have more than ten years in the saddle at the most. You won't meet one in a dozen who's over thirty, for what with deaths amongst the herds, broken bones, deserts, shooting-scrapes, Injuns and all the rest of it, we don't last long."

CHAPTER XI

Fire on the Plains

After the killing labour of the round-up, the drive north was like a picnic. There were sing-songs and dancing in the evenings and everyone fully enjoyed himself. The only trouble was when they passed within a few miles of some Mexican village. Then the cowboys would dash off as soon as the day's work was done, and often get into serious trouble because of their attentions to the village belles and the amount of spirits they drank.

Hugh heard a good many yarns of these scrapes and one night he was called out to help in the rescue of a couple of the outfit who had been thrown into the local jail. Straight Charlie and Long Jake had been arrested after a fight in a dance hall, where knives and six-guns had been used against them by jealous Mexican riders. The rest of the outfit had mixed in, and when the gun-smoke cleared away, four Mexicans had been killed and six pretty badly wounded. Two of the cowboys were dead, Straight Charlie and Long Jake were in the calaboose, and the other two, with several wounds apiece, had managed to reach their horses and streak for the camp to get aid.

Hugh, Bronco Harry and Bill Royce rode off at once, as there was very little chance of the two prisoners getting a fair trial from the vengeful Mexicans, and, looking at it coolly, it seemed quite certain that the cowboys had only acted in self-defence after they had been attacked without warning.

The three cow-pokes dismounted outside the village, and, taking full advantage of the darkness, worked their way towards the jail. This was a wooden building and seemed to be guarded only in the front, where a dozen men were sitting with rifles and six-guns. It was Hugh's first experience of real danger from gunmen, and his heart was in his mouth as he crept forward with his two companions. It was not a pleasant feeling to know that there was a crowd of well-armed men in front of him, who would be only too glad to shoot him down if they got the slightest idea that he was in the neighbourhood. A thin trickle of ice seemed to be making its way down his spine as he crawled along, and he would have given anything to be able to turn back. But, suddenly, when he thought about it, Hugh was amazed to find that he was more afraid of the others knowing that he was scared, than he was of the guns of the Mexicans, and, though the cold feeling persisted, he found himself pressing eagerly forward.

After what seemed an age they reached the back wall of the jail, and whilst Bill Royce and Hugh crouched down, each facing in opposite directions to

keep the keenest of look-outs for a sentry coming round the corner of the building, Bronco raised himself until his hat was on a level with the sill of the tiny lighted window above him.

"Are you there, Straight?" he whispered.

"That you, Bronco?" came back the answer. "Gee, but I'm glad you've come! How many of the boys are with you?"

"Two. Lightning and Chunky Royce. How're things with you?"

"Pretty bad. Long Jake's cut up a lot, and I've got three wounds which are going stiff on me."

"Hum!" grunted Bronco. "Listen, Straight. I'll pass you one of my six-guns if it'll be of any use."

"Not a bit," came back the whisper. "There's twelve Mexes and they're all armed. Let me have your knife and I'll try cutting my way through these planks."

Bronco passed him the long bowie, and asked if he should give him another for Long Jake to use. But this was refused, as that cowboy was too badly hurt to be able to do much for himself. For nearly half an hour, during every second of which the three cowboys expected some sentry to come round, Straight Charlie worked away. At first they tried to help him from the outside, but soon found that the weathered logs of the outer wall resisted their blades as though they'd been steel. After a while there came another whisper from the window.

"It ain't no manner of use, Bronco," said Straight.

"These walls'd need an axe and crowbar to do much good. I've got an idea, so listen carefully. There's some furniture and bits of bedding in here, and I'm going to start a fire so that we can burn our way out."

"Don't be a fool, man," hissed Bronco. "You'll be fried to death."

"It's no worse than hanging," came the grim answer. "I reckon that we'll hang some blankets in front of the door. The Mexes are all smoking like chimneys inside there, and they won't smell our fire very quick. This stuff's as dry as chips and what smoke there is will go out the window. We've got a jug of water and we'll soak two blankets to wrap our heads in while we lie down as close to the floor as we can get. Here goes."

In a few seconds there was a great gout of flame as the straw of their bedding blazed up and red tongues came streaming out of the window. Hugh and his comrades, every nerve tensed, waited for the first shouts of alarm from the Mexicans, the signal for them to go into action. The time seemed endless, and Hugh's thoughts were all on those two wounded men in that inferno of smoke and flame. Nearly two minutes passed, minutes that seemed like hours, and then there was a sudden hoarse shout of dismay from the guards. Instantly Bronco sprang at the door, which opened in his face as the Mexes streamed out gibbering in their own language, dismayed at the desperate action of the two prisoners in firing the jail over their heads. Bronco

staggered back, but Hugh and Bill dashed at the mob of milling, panic-stricken men, forcing them back into the big ante-room.

"Reach for the clouds, compadres!" shouted Bill, a six-gun in his hand. Hugh was close behind him, his revolver shining malignantly in his grasp. Only one of the men tried to draw and he dropped at once with a heavy slug from Bill through his shoulder. The sudden panic of the fire, followed by the dramatic appearance of the armed cowboys, completed the job—there was no fight left in the guards. For a moment, except for the fierce crackling of the flames, there was silence, and then Straight Charlie and Long Jake's voices started to roar for help from a door in the wall facing them.

Bronco, who was now in the room, sprang forward and drew the heavy bolts, and out staggered two smoke-blackened men.

"Keep 'em covered, Lightning," Bronco ordered. "Chunky, you get their guns, give one each to Straight and Long Jake, and pitch the rest into the fire."

With the opening of the cell door the draught had increased and a great sheet of flame was pouring through the little window. Luckily it was carried away from their direction. The Mexicans stood there with the fear of death—of two deaths, flame and bullet—plain on their sweat-streaked faces, but Bronco was moving fast.

"Lightning!" he snapped; "you and Chunky give

these two a hand out to the horses. I'll keep this bunch quiet for a couple of minutes and then I'll join you. Quick's the word, mates. Get moving before the whole darned village is alarmed."

He stepped towards the door and then turned to face the crowd of Mexicans standing with their hands raised, while Hugh and Bill holstered their guns, grasped the two ex-prisoners and disappeared into the darkness. Already there were shouts and lights amongst the other houses, and they lost no time in reaching their horses. Long Jake, the lighter man, was thrown over the pommel of Prince's saddle, and Hugh mounted behind him, while Straight Charlie was helped on to Bronco, the lightest man's horse.

They heard a shout from the burning jail-house and saw a dark figure break away, followed, after a few seconds, by the whole swarm of guards. Twice a pistol flashed in the night, and the Mexicans broke up and disappeared. In a few seconds Bronco was beside them, shouting instructions to ride for it and reach the wagon as soon as possible. Now guns were firing wildly behind, though none of the whining bullets came near. For nearly an hour they saw the red blaze of the jail, but, after three hours' hard riding, they staggered into camp with their two comrades.

A week later they reached the spot where it had been decided that the herd should be allowed to graze on part of the Circle-Triangle range. It had been mighty hard work with their depleted outfit—two men

killed and two so badly wounded that they had to be carried in the wagon—but by the end of that time, both Straight Charlie and Long Jake were once again able to sit their saddles. Now they were on the grazing grounds there was far less work, and men could be spared for short holidays to a distant settlement, or for a few days hunting. One day, when there were only four of them in camp, two of the cowboys who had been absent on a hunting expedition came galloping in at full speed.

Colley, the leading man, shouted: "There's a mighty big fire up north and it's coming this way! Guess it's a dozen miles in width."

Instantly every man was on his feet saddling-up, for there was not a moment to be lost. The foreman was giving instructions at once. "Will you two men who've just arrived stay here until the rest see the fire and come in. Black Pete, give us as much food as you can, for we may be away for five days; we four'll move out and start to fight the fire as far north as we can get."

Bronco Harry, Bill Royce and Hugh were the other three men. In five minutes the party was out of camp and heading towards the dull glow on the distant northern horizon. Twenty miles were covered before they saw the first flames in the darkness of the now fallen night. As they drew their horses to a halt, Bronco whistled.

"About as big a blaze as I've ever seen," he said. "Wind's rising, too."

A small bunch of cattle was grazing uneasily nearby, and the foreman at once picked out a steer and shot it. While Bill lit a fire the other three fell upon their knees and split the bullock into halves, from head to tail.

"Bronco," said the foreman; "will you ride east with Lightning until you meet some others of the outfit? Chunky and I'll go west. I guess that you'll find some of the boys already at work along the fire-line, but, if you don't meet any by the time you reach the end of the fire, head back and start fighting it yourselves."

They cut long faggots from a clump of dry bushes in a hollow, and, after lighting one end, they seized the other end to their saddles. They then tied their ropes to the other blazing faggot and started off. Hugh was told to make fast his rope to a leg of the half-bullock and mounted his horse—not Prince; he was riding another mount to spare his favourite the chance of accidents. He waited until Bronco was a quarter of a mile ahead, towing his blazing faggots, and making a trail of fire as the dried grass flamed when the brushwood passed over it, and then started after him. Bronco's trail was marked by a thin red line of fire, burning fiercely to leeward under the thrust of the wind. Hugh galloped close to the leeward side, over the blackened grass where the flame had just passed, towing the heavy half-carass behind him. Its weight and the raw under-surface instantly crushed

out the fire, leaving a burned break behind him, which it was hoped would be enough to check the approaching blaze. For ten miles they rode on before they halted.

"We're beyond the edge of the fire," Bronco said. "I guess that it's the other side where most of the danger lies, unless Baltimore Smith's outfit have seen it in time. Waal, we've done our part of the job so far."

Looking back, Hugh saw a great sea of fire surging across the plains. The wind had increased in force, and the air was full of smoke and ashes. Away behind them a thin red line, the windward side of the fire-break they had made, was creeping slowly against the wind to meet the main ocean of flame that was roaring down to meet it, making their own break more and more effective with every foot it crept.

"There're some bushes about half a mile back," Bronco said. "We'll ride back there and let the horses go. They're just about mad with terror right now, and we shan't want 'em any more, poor brutes."

As soon as they reached the bushes they dismounted and turned their mounts loose, while they got busy in cutting as many boughs as they could carry. Then, retiring from the strip of burned grass, which was now a good fifty yards wide, they awaited the onrush of the flames. Soon burning fragments came sailing through the air, and both men were working like demons to extinguish them as some of them landed to leeward of the fire-break. Single-handed they would

not have a chance all along that wide front, but other cowboys came galloping up, and soon men were labouring all along the front.

At times the fire got so strong a hold to leeward of the break, that it was only by making fresh fire-stops that they were able to hold it. It was a good thirty hours before the blaze was stamped out along their section of the line. Then, when men were dropping with fatigue, a rush-call came through that the flames had burst out farther to the west, and all hands had to mount the fresh horses which had been brought up and scurry off to give help where it was so sorely needed. It took three days of unremitting toil, of savage labour amongst smoke and blazing embers, before the danger was conquered. Singed, burned, black with smoke, the cowboys dropped exhausted where they stood when the "All Clear" was at last given, but their rest was short enough, for there was the very real danger that the Redskins would take advantage of the confusion and the fact that the herdsmen were away, to make a flying raid on the cattle which had just been saved from the maw of the furnace.

Five hours' sleep and then it was daylight again. The cowboys were mustered. Hugh, who had slept alongside his own wagon, dropped into the stream and had the luxury of a bathe. As the outfit mustered for breakfast, Long Jake suddenly stood up, shading his eyes.

"More bad news coming," he groaned. "Here's someone coming, galloping like the wind. Guess the Reds have been out on the track of the fire."

"Looks like Tom Newport," said Colley, as the rider came closer. "Waal, guess his news'll be true enough. Tom's no scaremonger."

"Get mounted, boys," shouted the newcomer, as he reined his horse on to its haunches beside the wagon. "Every man's wanted, and there ain't no time for speechmaking."

In a few minutes the outfit was saddled-up, with filled water-skins on their saddles, and cold food for several days all ready.

"Which way, Tom?" asked the foreman.

"North-east," he answered. "The Injuns came down and attacked Gainsford. Six men and most of the women and children of the settlement were killed by those red snakes. They've carried off five girls, and old man Rutherford's Rose is among 'em."

A roar of fury rose from the cowboys. "When did it happen?" Bronco asked.

"Yesterday evening 'bout ten o'clock. I wur riding that way and saw a light start up, and then two or three others. By the time I got to Gainsford, and I galloped considerable hard, the Injuns were gone, but I larned what'd happened from a boy who'd hidden himself in the bushes. He said that he'd seen Rose and four other girls carried off. Whether old Steve Rutherford were rubbed out or not, I don't know, and I

didn't stop to ask no questions. I knew where your outfit was, and I lit out straight for it."

"Then the varmints have got sixteen hours start at least," Bronco said. "That gives us mighty little chance of catching up with 'em until they're back into Indian country. Come on, boys, don't let us waste another minute."

The thudding of hurrying hoofs answered him.

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CHAPTER XII

An Indian Raid

Hugh was riding Prince, and the other cowboys were all well mounted on their best horses, and they reached the burned village of Gainsford before sunset. Eight women, four men and seven children, the survivors of a happy little settlement, met them as they rode in. The men had chanced to be absent when the Red devils swooped down, and the women and children had escaped by hiding in the rocks and bushes as soon as the yells of the Indians and the crash of the musketry had burst upon their ears.

"Where's Steve Rutherford?" demanded Bronco. "Was he wiped out?"

"No. He was out twenty mile away with a bunch of horses. He knew that he couldn't get back in time, but he returned with the animals, thinking that they might be useful."

"Where's he now?"

"Started out after those murdering brutes," the man replied. "We wanted to go along with him, but he allowed that he'd best go alone; thar ain't enough of us to fight that bunch, and he knew that you boys would be along plenty quick. Rube Garston and Jim

Gattling rode off an hour after Tom went for you, and I reckon they'll soon be back with a few more."

"How many horses you got?"

"Fifteen of old Steve's, and about thirty of ours, I reckon."

"That's enough to mount the ten of us, and another half-score as well," Bronco said. "Ours ain't much use for travel to-night. Guess we'll eat and then move. How many of you are there?"

"Six altogether, when two men out there come in."

"That makes us sixteen. I see that three of you've got rifles, and we've four more between us. The only question is, which way did the Redskins head? We'll wait for Steve, he'll have been trailing 'em and he'll let us know. If he don't arrive in the next half-hour we'll take lanterns and follow his trail. Now, get your innards full of victuals—no use starting fasting on a job like this. We'll need all our strength 'fore we've done."

Finally, three-and-twenty strong, the avenging party rode off, following old Steve Rutherford's trail, but it was nearly twenty miles before they came up with him, sitting at a small fire.

"They've gone over the divide into Springer Valley," the old man told them; "up the little canyon and towards the headwaters of Pequinah Creek. I followed as far as the canyon to make sure, and then headed back for help."

"Were they riding fast?"

"No. They didn't seem to be in no hurry. They halted here for some hours. I reckon that they'd ridden fast and far before they attacked Gainsford. They've got about a hundred head of cattle, and they've got three or four days' journey before them. They were going easy and didn't seem to reckon on being followed. It ain't often that they get chased, once they reach their own hills."

"There's a fresh horse for you, Steve," said Jim Gattling.

"Thank ye," answered the old man; "and thank you boys for coming so prompt. I reckon you've all travelled a fairish distance, and there ain't no sense in knocking our horses up, so let's cross the Divide and camp for the night. Most of you'll have done a hundred miles by then, and it's no good cracking up, with all that lies before us."

"How many of the varmints are there?"

"Over forty."

"We shan't have much trouble with that lot," Bronco said in relief.

"Not if we can catch 'em before they reach their village, Bronco, but I doubt if we'll manage that."

"Waal, Steve, we'll fight 'em if there's four hundred of 'em."

It was hard going over the shoulder of the Divide, and it took them five hours to reach their camping-ground by the stream in the valley-bottom at well past midnight. The horses were turned loose to graze, and

the men dropped instantly to sleep. With the dawn of day they were in the saddle again, after bolting a breakfast. Hugh had not changed horses at the village, but had stuck to Prince, for his speed would be of the greatest use on this expedition, and the animal had had a fairly easy time lately.

Ten miles up the valley brought them to the canyon which entered it at a sharp angle. It was wide at the mouth but soon narrowed down into a gorge not twenty feet wide, with precipice-walls of rock on either side. In some places it was almost choked with fallen rocks, and on them they saw the scratches made by the Indians, showing that they had passed recently, less than a day ahead. The canyon was over a mile in length, and led into a valley several hundred feet higher than the one they had just left. As soon as they came out of the gorge the party galloped along the plain trail left by the raiders. Mile after mile they pressed on, the country becoming wilder with every step.

Forests clothed the hills. Great masses of rock towered over them and huge blocks of stone encumbered the trail. Sometimes the track left the valley-floor and wound up the hillside, passing along narrow ledges with precipices above and below. Anxious as they were to hurry, much of the journey had to be done at a foot pace, for most of the horses, used to the plains as they were, became fidgety and nervous, needing coaxing and care to get them along.

They halted in the late afternoon, and camped for

the night. Next day was even worse, for they were now high in the mountains and Steve said that they were approaching the crests of that particular range. The going was now so hard that they were forced to halt at three in the afternoon, to give their horses a chance.

"Their trail is getting fresher, Steve," Bronco said. "Reckon we've gained on 'em a bit."

"Aye, we've gained, though not much," answered the old man. "They've got mountain ponies which move faster than ours, but the cattle are holding them back. Listen, I've stopped here, because there's a kind of wall of rock with a passage through it, a mile or two ahead of us, and though I don't expect that they think they've been followed, they may have left a sentry there to watch the top of that wall. Be careful of the wood you put on that fire, boys; make sure that every bit's as dry as a chip, we don't want any smoke to alarm 'em."

"What are your plans, Steve?"

"Waal, I reckon that if they've got a sentry on top of those rocks, he won't stop there after dark, and the danger will be at the far end of the pass. Like enough there'll be a couple of 'em left there. I reckon that the best idee's for me and Jim Gattling and two of the boys to go ahead careful like. If we find any of the skunks in hiding, we'll just rub 'em out, and then the rest of you can come along. It's no place for anyone as doesn't know every inch of the ground. Have

torches ready to light when one of us comes back with the news that the pass is clear.

"As soon as we've settled with the sentries, Jim and I will go ahead to scout. You see, we don't yet know which band this is, nor to what village they belong. We'll follow the trail and as soon as the rest of you've got safe through the pass, you'd better wait till we bring back word. I reckon, from their coming this way, that their tepees are about fifteen miles from the top. There's a big village that way and I expect they belong to it. They should be just about arriving there now, and if that's so, there'll be powerful feasting to-night. Pity we ain't handy, but that can't be helped, and we'd risk too much by moving 'fore it's full dark."

"Sounds all right, Steve. Who're you going to take with you?"

"Take you, Bronco, and Long Tom, if you'll come," said the old man.

As soon as it was dark the cowboys moved off. A few minutes later Steve halted them.

"Thar's the rock," he said, pointing to a long dark line above them. "If there's anyone up there they can't see us down here, but I reckon that if there ever was a sentry, he's gone on by this time. Now, you other fellows take our horses and just move on very slowly. You see that point of rock sticking up above the line? Waal, that's just this side of the pass, so make for it and stop there until one of us gets back to give you the news."

They had the torches ready, as they had split up a couple of pitch-pine saplings during the halt lower down. The four scouts moved quickly away, whilst the rest continued their steady advance. After some little difficulty they found the entrance to the pass and there dismounted to await developments. Time went slowly, and it was more than two hours before they heard a slight sound above them, and a minute or two later a footfall. Hugh heard a six-gun hammer click as it was cocked, and then Straight Charlie whispered a challenge.

"It's Long Tom," came the soft answer.

"Is it all right, Tom?"

"No, it ain't. It's as dark as the inside of a cow in this passage, and I've near brained myself a dozen times. We got the two sentries all right, shot 'em both, but one of their horses escaped and streaked back towards the village. So you guys'd best hurry."

With the aid of the torches the party made its way through the pass, and in half an hour they reached the upper end, where they found Bronco Harry waiting for them.

"We're to move half a mile to the right and stop," he said. "There's a clump of trees there which'll hide us. It's aarnation bad business that there hoss getting away. He'll bring the Injuns down on us. Steve ain't going very far. He sez that there's another village about three miles from the one he thinks the likeliest place, and when he's gone about four miles from here

he'll be able to see which way the trails go, and then he'll come back and join us in those trees."

"Did you hit the horse, Bronco?" Hugh asked.

"Do you think that I could miss a horse if I tried?" snorted Bronco Harry. "I hit him sure enough, more's the pity. If I'd missed him it wouldn't have mattered so much. If he had come galloping into the village without a mark they'd have thought a bear'd scared him, and they might've sent off a couple of braves to see if it's rider was all right, but now, with a bullet in its hide they'll know perfectly well that there's been a fight."

"You think that they'll come out in force?" Hugh asked.

"They may and they may not. I reckon that they won't; they'll just throw out some scouts all round their village and wait for morning light. They won't take any risk of being ambushed in the dark."

"Perhaps, as they're feasting and dancing, they won't take any notice of the horse."

"Nary a chance, Lightning," Bronco replied. "A couple of boys will be doing horse-guard and will see it at once. Besides, these varmints' ears are always wide open. They'd hear a horse coming at a gallop near a mile away. Directly the boy sees that the horse is saddled, he'll run in and tell 'em, and they'll lead it to the fire and examine it, and when they see my bullet-mark there'll be some rumpus, believe me."

Two more hours passed and then old Steve came in.

"The horse went straight for the village," he grunted. "Not a chance of surprising 'em now."

"What do you figure'll happen now?" asked Long Jake.

"Guess they'll keep a watch all night, and in the morning they'll send two or three out to scout. There ain't many trees about here, and they'll reckon that they'll see us just as soon as we see them, and you can bet your last red cent that the scouts will be on the best horses they possess. We could lie down close to the gap and shoot down the scouts as soon as they appear, but I don't see that that'll be any manner of use. When they didn't come back it would only put the others more on their guard than ever, and if we don't shoot 'em, they'll find our tracks and take back news of how many we muster.

"No, I can't see no way out of it. What makes it worse is that as soon as they takes back news of the two men we killed to-night, it's going to go mighty hard with the prisoners. I'm ready to give my life to save Rosie, but I'm not asking you boys to sacrifice yourselves as well, when I don't see that there's any chance of helping her. D'you see any way out of the jam, Bronco?"

"I don't, Steve," the cowboy answered. "There'll be at least eighty of the varmints in the village able to draw a trigger, and four to one's mighty long odds if we've to do the attacking. Can any of you boys think of anything?"

No one spoke. Suddenly, after the silence had lasted a full minute, Hugh raised his voice.

"I'm only a tenderfoot," he said, "and I don't suppose that my ideas will be any good, but, if I mention them, you fellows may be able to improve upon them. Supposing we leave four men in the gap. If the Indians send out four scouts, let three of them be shot or roped and the odd man allowed to escape. If only two come out, let one get away."

"What in creation are you driving at, Lightning?" gasped Bronco. "I can't follow you at all."

"I'll try to explain," said Hugh. "All the rest of us, except the four in the gap, should start at once and make a big detour so as to come out on the farther side of the village, and hide ourselves a mile or two away from it. I suggest letting one of the scouts escape, so that he can get back to the others and tell them that they found no sign of a party until they got close to the gap, when two or three shots were fired from ambush and his comrades were killed, while he escaped by the skin of his teeth. He will tell them that he was not pursued, and they'll naturally reckon that there's only a small party at the gap—three or four men from Gainsford out for revenge, and the Indians will send out a strong party of braves to finish them off.

"As soon as the men at the gap have settled with the scouts, they can make the same detour as we'd done, and rejoin us as quickly as possible. When we see the war-party quit the village and get safely away,

we'll charge home. Probably more than half the braves will have gone to attack the men in the gap, and the remainder won't be on their guard, as they'll not fear any attack and think that the settlers are still at the gap. We should be into the village before a shot is fired."

"Shake hands, youngster," roared old Steve, and came across with his hard old palm extended. "Gosh, that sure is a judgematical plan, and if it don't come off, well, all I can say is, that it oughter."

The cowboys chorussed their fervent assent. The old man asked Hugh if he'd like to stay and form one of the gap party, but he declined, saying that he was not nearly a good enough shot with the rifle. It was decided that as Steve knew the lie of the land, he should lead the main body on its long detour, while Bronco Harry remained in charge of the gap ambush. Three men volunteered to keep him company, and the rest of the party moved off.

Cowboys detest walking, and the part of that long march in the darkness they most hated, was having to dismount for considerable distances and to lead their horses. Three solid hours they tramped before old Steve would let them climb back into their saddles. The moon rose at two o'clock and its light allowed them to move faster. Turning up a hollow, they followed it for about two miles and then found themselves entering rugged and broken country.

"Here we are," said Steve at last. "The village lies

at the foot of these rocks. Now, boys, get what sleep you can until daylight, I'll keep guard and watch the horses." In a very few minutes all was deathly still in the little valley, but with the first flush of the dawn, old Steve roused them.

"I'm going to scout," he said. "Be sure that none of you moves out of this hollow, or shows himself, or a horse, on the skyline. The Injuns'll be looking for every slightest sign; the sight of one of you'll mean death for all of us, and the end of those poor girls whom they are holding as prisoners."

Steve Rutherford was gone for two hours, and mustered them.

"We're about three miles from the village," he told them; "but, by keeping to the foot of the hills we can easily get within half a mile of it without being seen."

Silently they moved off, keeping to the rocks, until Steve waved his hand for a halt.

"Now, above everything else, lie close, and don't let a man or a horse be seen. Lightning, you care to come with me and keep an eye on the village?"

Hugh was very anxious to do so, and, with old Steve and a short, squat cowboy known as Stumpy Evans, they climbed up the hillside and hid themselves, to wait for the moment when the attack must be made.

CHAPTER XIII

Rescued

The little party made its way along the steep rocks, keeping amongst the huge fallen boulders, stopping frequently to make a close survey of the broad valley below them, and so to assure themselves that no Indians were in sight before they dared to move farther.

“ We’ll halt here,” said Steve, at last. “ We can see the village from this place. Remember, Lightning—you’re new at this game—if we can see them, they can see us, so don’t go poking your head above the top of the rocks. Indians can see a lizard moving at this distance, and you can be sure that they’re keeping a sharp look-out.”

When they reached the observation-point they made their way with the most extreme care to the top-most boulders, and then, lying prone, stared through the chinks between them. The mountain air was so clear that though the village was half a mile away, it looked scarcely half that distance. The Redskins had chosen its position well; the hill rose perpendicularly behind it, defending it from all attack from the rear, while in front and on both sides, all brushwood had been cleared away so that there was no cover at all

left for attackers. Trees stood close to the tepees, giving shade during the heat of the day. A number of horses were grazing close to the village, guarded by some small boys. Smoke curled lazily from the pointed tops of the wigwams, and many men and women could be seen moving about under the trees.

"How long will it be, Steve, before the scout returns?" Hugh whispered.

"Another hour at least. I expect they started at daybreak. They wouldn't travel very fast going out, for they'd be looking for tracks and signs and they wouldn't want to blow their horses, as they might have to ride for their lives at any moment. I'd give 'em four hours; two and a half to reach the gap, and just over an hour for the one man to get back. Reckon he'll be here in between half an hour and the hour."

Twenty minutes passed slowly by, while the three scouts lay watching without making a move to betray themselves. Suddenly Hugh heard old Steve suck in his breath and then whisper sharply: "Jupiter! It's worked! Here the Red varmint comes." The other two caught sight of a galloping horseman breasting a swell about four miles away. He was still invisible from the village, but in a very few minutes he was sighted; three warriors ran out, leaped upon their horses and galloped out to meet him. They joined him, swept round without a check, and came tearing back to the village alongside him. A moment later a shrill, keening wail rose thinly on the morning air.

"They're feeling it now," said Steve grimly. "They're getting a slice of what they're so fond of handing out. It is all very fine when they go out to burn and rob and murder and to come back with plenty of scalps, but they don't like it when someone else plays the same game on them."

Nothing happened for some time, and Hugh asked Steve if the plan had failed.

"No," said the old plainsman. "They're holding a pow-wow now, talking the thing over. Look, there ain't a man to be seen under them trees; only women and children, but nary a warrior. There's a council going on in the chief's tepee. It'll be at least an hour before any of 'em makes a move."

He was right, for just over an hour afterwards there came a succession of shrill, wild yells.

"That's their war-whoop," muttered Steve. "The thing's settled and they're going off to see about it. They were sure to go anyway; the only question is how many of 'em are starting. Let's hope it'll be a strong party."

He lay watching for a while. "Five and thirty, I make 'em," he said, turning to Hugh.

"About that," the lad agreed; "though they keep moving about so much that I can't be sure to four or five."

"Five and thirty's right, Steve," said the other cowboy. "You've got the longest legs, Lightning; scoot over and tell the boys to be ready. Steve and I

will join you soon's the war-party are well away. Don't let the men move out of that hollow till we join you; there ain't no special hurry, for we mustn't attack till they've got some miles away. If they heard the guns they'd be like a torrent in their rush homewards."

Hugh did as he was bid. As he ran back and joined the main body he gave a yelp of joy to see that Bronco Harry and his three men from the gap had rejoined the outfit. Quickly he told the waiting men that everything was going according to plan, and then listened while Bronco told him how well the ambush in the gap had been carried out.

Everything was now got ready for battle. Horses were led up, saddles looked to, girths tightened and blankets strapped on. Steve came in with his comrade, and greeted Bronco with enthusiasm.

"We'll allow 'em another ten minutes before we open up, boys," said old Steve. "We'd better discuss what we shall each do when we reach the village, else there's going to be confusion, and those rattlesnakes may tomahawk the prisoners before we can lay our hands on 'em."

The plan of battle was swiftly settled. The cowboys would do the fighting, while the handful of settlers from Gainsford were to search the wigwams for the captives. They were certain to be somewhere near the lodge of the principal chief, as he would want to keep an eye upon them. "Mind, lads," finished Bronco,

turning to the cowboys, "there's to be no shooting of squaws and papooses. We've come to rescue the prisoners and pay the braves for what they did, but we've got no quarrel with the women and kids; we don't want to be as bad as they are."

"They've killed our wives and children," growled a settler; "why shouldn't we give 'em a dose of their own medicine?"

"'Cos we're whites and not Redskins," snapped Bronco Harry. "Get this, you farmers, we've come here to help you, and if you don't agree to what we ask, you needn't look to us for aid."

The settlers agreed at that, although very grudgingly. "Just one thing," Bronco said. "We may as well have it straight. If I see anyone harming a squaw or a papoose I'll shoot him. What about moving, Steve?"

Every man swung himself into his saddle. "Now, boys, gently until we get into sight of the village, and then ride like the deuce."

But the men were too ready for fight and the pace quickened rapidly. As they came in sight of the village they broke into a headlong charge. Yells and screams of alarm, shrieks from Indian mothers, shouts and orders, the barking of dogs and a spattering of shots welled up from the wigwams under the trees. Hugh, astride the racing Prince, braced himself for the shock of impact, as the swirling charge rushed down. His revolver was in his hand as he lay low along

the roan's neck, expecting a volley as they pushed their charge home. The wild excitement of that mad gallop was in his blood, and he cared nothing for the risk and the danger, anxious only to get to close quarters with these murderous villains who had massacred the women and children of the little white settlement. To his intense amazement, not a shot was fired as they raced closer at the tepees. Within two minutes of the start of that headlong charge the horsemen were bursting into the village.

But the place was almost deserted. A few old men stood at the doors of the wigwams; a handful of aged crones were quivering and mumbling in front of a large tepee in the centre, but otherwise there was no one about. Even as they drew their horses on to their haunches a skin-wall broke open, and five white women came running out into the open, crying their joy.

"All safe, Rosie?" shouted old Steve, her father, as he pulled in his horse when he saw her.

"All safe, Father," and a thundering cheer rose from the cowboys, as they leaped from their horses to crowd round the poor girls. The cowboys rushed into the wigwams to make sure that there were no babies or sick in them, and then set fire to every one, seizing quarters of venison and other provisions to help them on their road home. There were many piles of furs and skins stored in the wigwams which the Indians had hoped to take into the posts for trade, and these went up in the general burning-out. The

scalps they had ripped from the heads of their enemies were thrown into the flames, and everything else of value that could be found—a very heavy loss that would do something towards punishing them for the awful massacre of the poor settlers of Gainsford.

“What about seizing some people for hostages?” Bronco Harry called out. “We’ll have a mighty difficult job to win out of these hills, and if we have a chief or two, or their families, with us, as hostages, we might have a better look-out.”

“Nary a chance,” answered one of the cowboys. “Some of the braves have galloped off to warn their war-party, and the sooner we get moving the better. The squaws and the rest of the men are hidden up the valley in some secret draw, and we’ve got no time to go hunting for ’em. The smoke of the fire will bring the war-party back at the gallop, and the Indians from all the villages for miles around. We’ve roped horses for the girls, and the sooner we get moving the healthier it’s going to be for all of us.”

Three minutes later they rode away from the blazing village, with the rescued prisoners on the Indian horses in their centre.

“Them thar’s our cattle,” said Steve, pointing to a small herd out on the plain; “but it ain’t no use thinking of them now.”

“Guess you’re right, Steve,” gritted Bronco Harry. “It’s not hides nor horns we’ve got to think about, but how to keep our own hair on our heads.”

"D'you think they'll catch us, Bronco?" Steve asked.

"I don't think nothing at all," Bronco answered grimly. "They're just as sure to catch us as the sun is sure to rise in the east. We've got every inch of a hundred miles to go on horses that have been travelling hard for three days. By this time the braves who rode for help have joined their war-party, and if we can reckon on ten miles start it's just about all we can hope for. Still, when they do catch us they won't be much more than three to one."

"Well, that don't sound too bad," Steve replied.

"Wouldn't be, if they came down and made a fight for it," said Bronco; "but there's no hope of 'em doing that. They'll surround us, as they know that we'll have to leave half our men to guard the women and the rest are not enough to make a charge. Like enough, there's a dozen of 'em right now raising the other villages to come and help stamp us out. You can reckon on two or three hundred of 'em being on our track within a few hours. No, don't you make any mistake about it, Steve, we shan't get clear away and we'll have to fight. The point is, where shall we do it? You know the country, and if you can choose some likely place within fifty miles, where we can stand the brutes off, we may still have a chance. Make it forty miles if you can, to give us more of a chance, for that's about all we can count upon before we have the Redskin war-whoops in our ears, I guess."

"The Two Brothers are just about forty miles from here," said Steve Rutherford.

"Ah! I've heard of them. Two buttes close together, ain't they?"

"Yes. We should be safe enough there if all the Redskins in creation were attacking us. They might starve us out, but they'd never be able to climb them in the face of our fire. One of the Brothers there ain't no climbing at all; it stands straight vertical all round, but the other has a track up. In fact, I've seen cattle on the crest."

"Do you know the way up, Steve?"

"Shore do. Once went up when we were hunting some cattle that had been stolen by the Injuns from farms in the Canadian. It ain't a road that you'd choose to drive a team down, and I should never have believed that cattle could've climbed it, if I'd not seen one on the top. It's just the place to suit us, though."

They were making no attempt to gallop, but were holding their horses at a canter, the pace to which cow-ponies are most accustomed. As they breasted a ridge, Steve pointed across the low country before them. "Them there are the Brothers," he said.

"They don't look very far away," said Hugh, who chanced to be riding close behind.

"I guess they're fifteen miles off, Lightning."

"Really? I should have said that they were not more than five if anyone had asked me," Hugh answered.

"I wish they were," Bronco grunted. "We'll have these pesky Redskins round our ears before we're half-way there."

"We ought to be able to stand them off if we can reach those buttes," Hugh said quietly.

"If there's any water, we'll have a chance," Bronco answered.

"Water?" Hugh asked puzzled.

"You've hit it," said old Steve. "There's a shallow depression on the summit, not very deep, not more than three or four feet, and if we're lucky there may be still some left in it from the rains, though I ain't counting on that."

Hugh fell silent for a while as they rode onwards. "I've been thinking," he said suddenly. "If you'll let me ride straight on I may be able to reach the next ranch and raise the alarm. Prince here can do it, if any horse can."

"He might, if he's had a couple of days' grazing, but he's had precious little rest and feed since we started, and he'd never cover the hundred miles you'd have to travel. No, no, lad, the Injuns is all on fresh horses, and they'd ride you down in no time."

"I guess the job of going for aid'll be mine," said old Steve. "Whoever goes has got to know this country and where to ride, and also understand the ways of these Red varmints, so I guess that I'm the man for that job. Listen!" and he raised his hand suddenly.

They checked their horses simultaneously. A long-drawn, quivering, throbbing yell came through the air, and, looking back, they saw against the skyline, a large confused body of horsemen.

"I guess that's a good two miles, Bronco," said old Steve. "How much do you make it, Bronco?"

"About that, Steve, and we've got twelve to cover to reach Two Brothers," answered the cowboy leader grimly, his sunburned face set and tense. "Now, if you want to save your hair, boys, and bring these girls safe back home, you've got to ride for your lives. Get going."

CHAPTER XIV

Surrounded by Redskins

The horses, urged by whip, voice and spur, put their last ounce into the hand-gallop demanded of them. Hugh quietly slipped towards the rear, where he thought he might be of most service if the Redskins came to close quarters.

Long Tom was riding beside him, and seemed to have seen what Hugh was trying to do. He grinned cheerily.

"One advantage of being the chasers instead of the chased," he said, "is that you can push ahead with your fastest horses; when you're being chased, your pace has got to be that of your slowest animals, if you're not going to throw some of your own people to the wolves."

That was a point that had not struck Hugh, but he saw how true it was. "D'you think we'll reach the Brothers without getting caught?" he asked, as he held Prince in to keep his place at the rear of the scurrying party of fugitives.

"Reckon so, if some of the bands from the other villages don't come cutting in from right or left," answered the cowboy. "There ain't no way of telling

where they may be. They'll have guessed the line we'd take and may have ridden across country to cut us off. With their fresh horses that shouldn't be any too difficult for 'em to do."

"I suppose that Steve knows?" Hugh asked, avoiding a slippery stretch of shelf-rock jutting through the dry grass.

"He ain't said much," answered Long Tom, "but he told me to keep my eyes skinned for any braves on the flanks."

Five miles were covered and still the Indians behind them did not seem to have gained upon them.

"Say, Steve," shouted Jim Gattling; "can't we take it a bit easier? Some of the hosses are beginning to blow. What about a five minutes walk to let 'em get their wind?"

Steve turned in his saddle, without slackening his pace, looking back at the pursuers, and then took a glance at the horses. Certainly some of the wiry ponies were starting to show signs of distress; the headlong pace was killing them.

"Take it a bit easier," he ordered. "When we reach that brow a mile ahead we'll be able to see clearer and judge what we can do."

Still at the gallop, but an easier one than before, they reached the crest of the ridge. From it there was a smooth and regular slope right to the foot of the Brothers, standing six miles away. Steve yelped his alarm.

"By thunder," he called, "we've got to ride for it. Look down there, they're cutting in from both sides. Ride, you cow-pokes, ride!"

There was no need to urge them. To both right and left, war-parties of Redskins were cutting in to reach the buttes before them. The one to the left was about a mile away, but some distance nearer the goal than they were; the right party was at least two miles distant, and farther away from the Brothers than they were.

"We'll beat that right-hand lot," shouted Bronco, as he galloped beside Hugh, "but the others will cut us off for sure."

"Guess you're right, Bronco," said Steve, who was riding a few feet away. "Thank goodness there ain't more'n forty or fifty of 'em."

The old man moved around, now speaking to one group and then to another, until he had detailed his orders. He, as the only one who knew the path up the steep mount, would push along with the nine riflemen and the rescued girls, while Bronco, in command of the cowboys and settlers who had only six-guns, would take post on the flanks of the other party, until they had passed through the left-hand band of Indians, and then they would turn about and charge. The girls and riflemen would dismount when they reached the rocks, and then put down a covering fire to enable the survivors of the charge to withdraw behind a screen of their long-range bullets.

On they rushed, and the Indians, seeing that they

could easily cut them off from the buttes, slackened their pace a little, evidently waiting for the large war-party on the right to join them. They were trying to delay the charge of the cowboys until the last possible moment so as to have reinforcement closer at hand. Steve grunted his satisfaction at their tactics.

"The durn fools," he said. "They won't be at the foot of the butte more'n a hundred yards in front of us, and that won't give 'em time to do more than face about and have more than one shot at us, before we charge home."

Scarcely another word was spoken as they galloped onwards. Mile after mile had now been passed, and the buttes were towering into the sky in front of them. As they drew within half a mile of the foot of the Brothers, the men quietly fell into the places allotted to them, and watched with narrowing eyes the diminishing distance between them and the Indians, who were now almost directly ahead, and coming in at a slight angle, but still facing in the same direction as they were. Suddenly, when the Redskins were not more than one hundred and fifty yards from the lower rocks of the butte, they reined sharply and faced about. The whites were not two hundred yards behind, while the large party of Indians on the right were still more than half a mile distant. The braves in front did not wait for the cowboy charge, but came dashing right at them, firearms blazing as they rode.

Not a shot was fired in reply. Knee to knee, with

the girls in the centre and screened by the first rank, the cowboys drove in their spurs and rode hard, with tense, grim-set faces, straight at the savage foe. Hugh was well out on the left flank, his heart ablaze with the fierce joy of battle, his revolver in his hand. When less than twenty paces divided the lines and only a split-second lay between Redskin and cowboy, the six-guns opened their rapid fire, and Indians pitched headlong from their saddles.

One man with a long spear couched, rode straight at Hugh, the gleaming head of it shining in the bright sunlight. Not for a second did the lad check his aim; his revolver belched and the painted brave suddenly threw up his arms, the long lance falling inertly as the lead bullet struck home. At the same instant a glinting arc of light swept before Hugh's face—another Redskin had smashed at him with his tomahawk—but the last two shots in the Colt, brought snappingly across, sent that warrior to the Happy Hunting Grounds. The Redskins melted like snow before that solid line of cowboys with flaming guns riding boot to boot, as though they had been heavy cavalry upon some great battlefield.

It was all over too quickly for Hugh to realize that it had finished. At one moment there was a yelling, whooping mob of savage horsemen in front of him, then, as quick as a flash, they were through, with nothing to face but the precipitous flanks of the Brothers.

"Forward!" yelled old Steve, to his riflemen, and dashed on with the girls in the centre.

"Face about and reload!" roared the ringing voice of Bronco Harry. "Dismount!"

Only just in time, for the few survivors of the Indian party had cast themselves headlong from their mounts, and, taking cover behind rocks and bushes, commenced a heavy fire with their rifles. Instantly, from higher on the butte, there was an answering storm of lead, one that beat down the fire of the Indians as Steve's crack riflemen came into action.

"Mount, boys!" shouted Bronco, as the savage snipers ran for their horses. The Redskins had no chance whatsoever, for the cowboys came crashing home in a charge that ended the existence of that band for ever. Straight into the confused ranks of the Indians the cowboys rode, and in half a minute there were few survivors left to join their comrades of the other parties.

Bronco Harry was too wise in the ways of Indian fighting to waste any time in useless rejoicing. His bull voice roared again, and every man turned and scurried for the butte, cheered by the riflemen and rescued prisoners as they reached safety on the steep path of the butte. The horses were led up and made snug under cover, while Steve took his riflemen to occupy a position where they could get a clear field of fire at the enemy below.

Nearly thirty Redskins had fallen in those two

wild charges, and half a dozen more of the second band were killed by the riflemen, before they galloped out of range. The large party which had been chasing the cowboys, now rode down and joined the rest, and dismounting, bunched together, out of reach of the rifle-bullets, to discuss their plans.

The cowboys had lost two men, John Spencer and Boston Bill, whose bodies lay out on the plains, and four more had been wounded, while one of the girls had been struck in the fleshy part of the shoulder by a rifle-ball. Steve issued orders at once. The horses were picketed, and the men climbed to the level top of the precipitous hill, by the only route, the path upon which they stood. Hugh and two men were left at the bottom with rifles to prevent the Indians from approaching, while Bronco and three cowboys were in charge of the horses on a broad shelf a little higher up.

A couple of Indian rifles tried to snipe the whites as they scrambled up the exposed path, but a few shots from Hugh and his comrades drove them away, and the climb was made without casualties. The Redskins drew off, and soon several pillars of smoke rose from their midst, as they lit fires and settled down.

Long Tom, one of the two men with Hugh, looked up at him. "There's no sense in waiting down here any longer," he said. "Them varmints ain't going to try attacking us. It's not their way to throw away lives by fighting, when they know that they've only to wait, to win without firing a shot. Let's go on up."

The path was fairly easy for three-quarters of its length. The rock on either side had crumbled away in past ages, so that the high-sided butte looked as though it were surrounded by a gradual ramp of shale. The butte-summit stood about three hundred feet above the plain, and the ramp was covered with bushes and trees until it ended abruptly in a sheer wall of rock, running straight up for fifty feet above the tree-tops. This wall was broken at only one point, by a cleft about three feet wide at the bottom, and slanting as steeply as the roof of a church.

The lower part of the path up this last fifty feet was worn and polished smooth by the rains of centuries and the sliding feet of cattle, and Hugh found that he had to sling his rifle and to use both hands to grasp the knobs of rock on either side, in making his way up. When he reached the summit he found that it was almost flat, a couple of hundred feet wide, and over two hundred yards long. It was covered with grass, while several trees, some of them large, stood upon it. In the centre there was a shallow rock-pan, with a little, very little, water in it; enough for a week, old Steve reckoned, or for a month if they abandoned their horses. Hugh immediately thought of Prince. He was not going to think of shooting him or leaving him to die of thirst, or to be captured by the Indians. Steve's next words reassured him.

"We'll bring the best of the horses up here," he announced. "The rest, if we decide to keep 'em, can

find plenty of grazing under the trees, and we can carry down water to 'em in our hats." He went on to make out the orders. "We'll want four men down below all the time," he said, "to keep control of the bottom end of the path. There's several more bands of Reds come in to join those devils down below, and I reckon that there must be close on three hundred of them there by this time."

"What difference does it make how many there are," Hugh asked, "so long as they daren't attack us?"

"Are you crazy?" demanded Bronco Harry. "The more there are of them, the more sentries and scouts they can put out to see that none of us rides off for help. And the stronger they are, the bigger the force we shall need to relieve us. Why, they'll have scouts out for miles around, and if a small expedition comes out to help us, they'll leave enough men to keep us bottled up while their main body rides off to fight the outfit coming to our aid."

"Sorry, Harry," said Hugh. "I'm pretty green to this country, and I hadn't thought of that. Is there any chance of their getting sick of the siege and drawing off?"

"Not a chance. If there's one thing that an Indian never tires of, it is sitting down and waiting. Time's naught to them. They can stay down there just as comfortable as though they were in their own villages; they can send off hunting-parties, while the boys will bring corn and gather their fuel. If we stay up here

six months, they'll stick down there, quite happy. You can bet that they know this place well, and can calculate just how long our water's going to last. Food don't bother us, for we can eat the horses if we have to, but they know that we'll hang on to the animals as long as we can, and they'll reckon that about three weeks is the limit of our stand."

The women had lit a fire and were preparing a meal from the provisions they had seized at the village, and soon everyone, except the two sentries, was sitting down to a hot dinner that went a long way towards making new men of them. When they had finished old Steve wiped his whiskers and spoke.

"Waal, boys," he said, quietly, "the sooner we get help the better; there certainly ain't no time to be lost. There's no denying that we're in a pretty tight fix, and it won't be easy to raise a force large enough to fight that big mob down below. I reckon that we couldn't muster more than fifty cowboys from the Canadian, so I'll have to ride to the nearest fort for the cavalry. That's near two hundred miles from the Canadian, and it'll take me three days to get there after I leave the ranches. It'll take another four at the very least, before the troopers can get back to them. You can't reckon on less than a week. I shall be two days in getting to the ranches as there won't be any moving in daylight. So, if I start off at once, you can't reckon on seeing me back before ten days at the earliest."

"That's about it, Steve," agreed Bronco Harry. "We can't manage without the U.S. cavalry. Guess we can hold on here easy for a fortnight; longer, if we rid ourselves of the animals. You'd best go to-night, Steve. It'll give you the best chance, though you'll have to watch your step. Them Injuns'll be like bees round a honey-pot at the foot of the butte."

"Why not let me go?" Hugh asked. "Steve is far too valuable to risk his life. He's wanted up here."

"Thanks, kid," said the older man. "I appreciate your offer, but the only man with a chance to get through is someone who knows this country like the palm of his hand, and is also wise to Injuns and their ways, and I guess that that means me—Steve Rutherford."

"How do you mean to make your get-away, Steve?" Hugh asked.

"Tie the ropes together, Lightning, and get lowered down over the ledge."

"I've been looking at the ridge that runs from this butte to the other," Hugh said slowly, "and it struck me that if you were lowered down on to it you might reach the other of the Brothers. Two others could be lowered with you, and they could send you down from the far side of the other butte. You say that no one's ever been on it, so the Indians are not likely to be so thick around it as they will be round the foot of this one."

"Bully for you, Lightning!" shouted the old man.

"You're right once more. We'll do it that way. Two of you come along with me, while the rest get the horses. It's dark enough to start, so let's get moving."

"Can I be one of the two?" Hugh asked.

"Sure thing, Lightning," said Steve. "After all, it was your idea. I reckon I'll stay and see the horses up before I get moving."

It was terrifically hard going to get the animals up the steep and narrow path, but they managed it at last, with the aid of ropes, and by tying strips of blanket around their feet to help them get a footing. At last, after prodigious pulling and hauling, Prince and the other four best horses stood safe on the summit. Hugh, dashing the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve, said:

"Gosh! Didn't someone say that cattle have been known to make their way up here on their own? I'd like to see one of them do it."

"Cattle can climb like goats," said Straight Charlie, who stood beside him in the darkness. "You see, their hoofs are softer than horses' are, and they get a better grip on rock. But horses'd do it, too, if they weren't shod. Shoes don't give 'em a chance."

An hour later it was pitch dark, except for the star-shine. With the greatest care not to show themselves on the skyline, to be seen by the cat-eyed Indian scouts, the men, with their ropes knotted together, crawled to the point from where Steve had decided to make his attempt. Steve kissed his daughter, and then came back to the sharp edge of the butte.

"Lower away," he said. "Guess I'll be seeing you all again in about ten days. So long." With his rifle slung over his shoulder he disappeared as the cowboys paid out the rope, sliding it over a folded blanket to prevent it from chafing on the rough rocky edge. A jerk came on it, after it had grown slack, and then Bronco Harry and Hugh were lowered, with another long length of rope coiled round their shoulders.

Hugh found himself bumping against the rock face and did all that he could to fend himself off, but got pretty badly scraped and bruised. The drop seemed endless, and he was wondering if he had missed the knife-like crest of the neck between the buttes, when hands grasped his ankles and steadied him down until he found that he was sitting astride the neck, with two dark forms, those of Steve and Bronco Harry, looming close to him.

"Get out of the noose," Steve whispered, and when Hugh had done so, went on: "Now, for Pete's sake, crawl gently. Don't send any loose pieces of stone rolling down to warn the Reds, or they'll guess what we're up to."

It was a nightmare business sidling along that sharp ridge, keeping a strict guard against dislodging any of the weathered stone, and knowing that any slip would send one crashing down to death at the end of a helpless roll down the steep slope. But at last the other butte stood above them, and they found that they could easily reach its flat summit. Swiftly they crawled

across it, careful not to appear on the skyline, and reached the sheer drop on the farther side. Steve said not a word; talking was too dangerous; he just gripped their hands as he secured the rope round himself, and then he was gone. At last the weight on their aching arms was relieved, there were three sharp jerks, and in a few seconds the empty noose was drawn up beside them. Then, once again, that awful crawl across the neck of rock, until they found the dangling rope at the farther side, and many willing hands drew them back into safety.

Bronco Harry laid himself close to the edge, and stayed there nearly two hours. At last he came back to the fire round which the rest were sitting, safe from Indian bullets, thanks to the height of the butte and the fact that they were on the banks of the little pool in the hollow.

"I reckon the old man's got away safe," he announced. "There's been no sound down there and there would have been if they'd sighted him. There's plenty of the varmints about. Too much barking of prairie dogs and hooting of owls for it to be natural; that's the scouts letting each other know where they are. I guess Steve's safe away."

"Thank God!" said Rosie, his daughter, fervently, a sigh of thankfulness echoed by all the others.

"D'you think there's any danger of a night attack, Bronco?" asked Hugh.

"You can never tell with Injuns," answered the

cowboy; "but I don't think so. Too dangerous, though some of the young braves might try it, to win a few scalps for themselves. We'll keep a good guard, and the rest will sleep with their arms ready to hand in case of alarm."

It was settled that half of the little garrison should be always on guard, and posts were taken up at once. At midnight, Hugh found himself detailed to go down to the bottom of the path with Bronco Harry and Long Tom. Three men were about fifty yards up the path, with two more just below the remaining horses, and another couple where the path narrowed, while its head was also picketed.

When the men they had relieved had left to go back to the summit, and the three of them settled down for their spell on guard, Long Tom whispered:

"Listen to the calls out there in front, Lightning. There's plenty of Redskins moving about and warning each other to look out. They're as thick as flies out there, for they reckon if one of us is going to try and make a bolt for it and summon help, he'll have to do it this way. Will you move along a few yards to the left and take cover behind a rock? I'm going over to the right and Bronco's taking the centre."

"Keep your eyes and ears wide open, both of you," whispered Bronco. "These varmints can crawl as silently as snakes on a rock, and you're liable to be knifed or tomahawked before you know there's a Red within a hundred yards of you. Watch for moving

bushes or things that look like stones and yet move about."

It was an eerie and nerve-racking business staring out, with ears astretch, over the dark plain, and Hugh was on a continual strain, checking the positions of looming shadows which might or might not be rocks and bushes, and were possibly creeping Redskins hoping to rush the outpost line. Hour after hour passed, and by the end of them he was at such a pitch of tension that he almost shot Bronco Harry, who had crept over to speak to him.

"It'll be daybreak in an hour, Lightning," he whispered. "If they're going to try anything it will be then they'll do it, just when the sky begins to grow grey."

Everything remained quiet, however, though a dozen times, a score of times, Hugh's palm contracted on the butt of his six-gun as he imagined he saw a bush or rock move. As soon as the sun rose the sentries were changed, and it was a much relieved youngster who climbed back to the crest for the hot breakfast the women had made ready. All the watchers retired from the edge of the summit, for in broad daylight it was impossible for the Indians to attack without being seen. Two hours later a party of the Redskins started towards them from their camp, to pull their horses to a halt five hundred yards from the base of the butte; then two of them advanced, holding up their arms to show that they were unarmed.

"I guessed that they'd want a talk this morning," said Bronco Harry. "Two of us'd better go down and parley with them."

A cowboy, who spoke the Indian tongue, went down with Bronco Harry to the foot of the path, their six-guns swinging in their holsters, for it was certain that the Red messengers would have their knives and tomahawks somewhere about them, and there was no sense in taking risks. Hugh watched the meeting from his post on the edge. It lasted about ten minutes, and then the envoys parted and went their separate ways. The result was clear enough, for as soon as the Indian messengers reached their main body, a quivering, throbbing war-cry rose into the still air.

Bronco Harry told them of the Redskin terms: surrender of the women prisoners and to give up all arms as a condition of being allowed to go free. There was a sharp, scornful bark of laughter from the cowboys.

"Do they think we're mad?" said Long Tom. "Lay down our arms, and they'd lift our scalps for us."

That night Hugh was one of the first watch and was relieved at midnight. The Indians had remained quiet all day, and as the relieved sentries climbed back to the summit, Bronco Harry said:

"Shouldn't be surprised if they try a night attack just before the dawn. We'll call the men coming off guard and get the rest of the horses up to the top. If

the worst comes to the worst, we're going to need 'em for food."

After another struggle the remaining animals were brought into safety, and the tired men lay down to sleep. Hugh, utterly exhausted, slept like a log, but he sprang quickly enough from his blankets as a crashing volley of shots roared into the dank air of the grey dawn. He lost no time in rushing to his battle-station on the right of the path-head. Down below, he could see that the guards were falling back, retreating up the path, for the flash of firearms crept higher and higher up the butte, while the blood-chilling scream of the war-whoop surged up towards him as the Redskins came charging to the attack.

CHAPTER XV

With the Wagon Teams

It was still too dark to make out the figures of the attackers, so for fear of hitting their own men, Hugh and the others on the summit remained out of action. Bill Royce was beside him and called over:

"There must be a couple of hundred Injuns, Hugh, and they'll force their way through the bushes despite anything our boys can do. You'll see our fellows up here pretty quick; it's hopeless to try holding out down there."

A couple of minutes later several forms were seen coming up the narrow path. "Who goes there?" challenged Hugh, his six-gun menacing the advancing figures.

"It's all right," came back the answer in English. "They're too many for us, and Bronco's ordered us to fall back and help you guys to cover the retreat of the rest."

Gradually the defending fire down below died away, as man after man succeeded in making his retreat up the steep path. At last all were safe on the plateau, and then the long rifles of those on the edge cracked

out. There was a shouting of yells and war-cries, and the leaping figures of the Indians disappeared into the cover of bushes and boulders, where they at once commenced a heavy fire. Rason, the cowboy interpreter, was the first casualty. He staggered back with a bullet through his head, while a shout on the far side of the path showed that another white man had been hit.

"Lie down, boys!" Hugh shouted, "and fire over the edge."

In a few seconds the whole party were gathered on the crest, well under cover. The daylight was broadening, and the first golden lances of the rising sun were streaking the eastern sky over the distant hills, but not an Indian could be seen, so good was their cover, though the puffs of smoke from trees and rocks showed what a large number there were taking part in the assault.

"Will they try a charge?" Hugh asked.

"Reckon not," said Bronco, beside him. "I expect that they didn't think that there'd be so strong a guard on the lower slopes. Thought they might break through and reach this path before the rest of us had time to turn out and make a defence. Anyway, they can't gather thick enough amongst those rocks to muster enough strength for a charge."

Bronco was right. The Indians soon learned that it was highly dangerous to betray their lurking-places by firing and letting themselves be marked down by

the smoke of their weapons. Every shot was answered instantly, and many were killed as they raised their heads to aim. The firing gradually died down, until it ceased altogether.

"Waal," said Bronco, after shooting had ceased for nearly an hour. "That leaves us just about as we were before, except that they're holding the lower slopes and are in a better position for a night attack than they were. Six of you stand guard here—there's no fear of the varmints trying anything in daylight—while the rest of us has a talk over what's to be done."

Hugh was asked his opinion, like the rest of the men, and said:

"If they make a determined night attack we may kill a lot of 'em, but it's odds that some of them will get through. We've just got to block the gap. We'll have to kill some of the horses, as the water's beginning to run low. What about piling up their carcasses down there? They'd make a fine breastwork."

The rest agreed, and another cowboy improved on the idea by suggesting that they should cut down some of the trees and brushwood on the summit and use their branches to make an entanglement in front of the breastwork. The Indians could never overcome such an obstacle as long as there were even a couple of men left to use their guns. There was not an axe or hatchet amongst the lot of them, and it took several hours to hack off sufficient brushwood and boughs to make an efficient barricade. They decided to spare

the horses, as there was always the chance of rescue arriving sooner than expected, and the strength of their barrier of boughs, with the ends sticking down the path and their butts firmly wedged, was amazing. A few random shots came whistling up the steep path while they worked, but no one was hurt.

After that there was no further question of the Redskins trying a frontal attack, and any other was impossible. The water was severely rationed, and as soon as the meat brought from the Indian teepees was finished, they slaughtered one of the Indian ponies commandeered for the rescued prisoners, and used its flesh for food. The horses were picketed to conserve the grazing, and, with care, there seemed to be no reason why they should not hold out for a fortnight at least.

Soon after daybreak on the twelfth day, two Indian scouts were seen to be galloping very fast towards their main camp, and a wavering cheer rose from the top of the butte, for the defenders were certain that these riders were bringing their chiefs news of a relieving force that must be approaching. Soon scores of Redskins were seen to be dashing wildly about the main camp, while screams and yells filled the air as they raised their deadly war-whoop. They secured their horses and in a few minutes were seen to be mustering, ready to be led out to battle.

"Let's get the rifles to the edge," shouted Long Tom. "All the Reds on the lower slopes will be breaking

cover in a few minutes to go out and join their friends, and we should be able to stop a few of them from being any nuisance to the people who are riding to save us."

Sure enough, scores of Indians made an attempt to dash out of their thick cover lower down the butte, and started running towards their main encampment. The garrison opened fire, but a running man at that distance is a tricky target, and not a shot took effect. Bronco Harry snorted his disgust, and told them to drop their guns and bear a hand in clearing the path of its barricade and getting the horses down, so that they could chip in and help the relieving force. A sentry gave a shout.

"I can see 'em, I can see 'em!" he yelled in high delight.

"How many of 'em?" shouted one of the men helping to get the horses down.

"About eighty, I guess," the guard answered. "There's a thick clump in the middle that looks like soldiers, while there's thirty odd riding loose which'll be the cowboys." In quarter of an hour all the horses were saddled and led down the path. By that time the Indians were mounted and advancing in a long line to meet their enemies.

"Jim," said Bronco Harry; "I want you and two men to stay here to protect the women in case any of the Injuns try to break back. Will you stand on the edge and when you see the fight begin, wave your hat? We shan't be able to see what's happening from down

there, and we can't make a start until the fight's joined, if we're to be of any use at all."

At the foot of the butte the cowboys halted and then swung themselves into the saddle. There they sat for ten minutes, their eyes upon Jim Gattling standing on the crest far above them. At last the signal came. He waved his hat, and with a shout the little party went thundering out to bear their part in the battle that was starting. After half a mile they came in sight of the conflict. The Indians had boldly closed with the relieving force. Amidst the smoke of firearms, Hugh could see the bright flickering of cavalry-sabres and Red tomahawks as the desperate combat reeled from side to side, while the crackling of revolvers and rifles was almost incessant.

"Keep well together, boys," Bronco Harry shouted. "No yelling until we're close upon them. Keep steady and well together and we'll go through 'em like a knife through cheese."

Grim silence was kept as the hard-bitten group of cowmen galloped hard on their perfectly fresh horses towards the swirl of the battle. Not until they were within a hundred yards did the Redskins, busily engaged with the column, see them, and raise a cry of alarm. They faced round, bright eyes and beak noses in a smother of fiercely painted faces, but they were too late. Like the prow of a ship cutting the seas, the cowboy charge, irresistible in its speed and dash, crashed home, six-guns crackling, the riders shouting

like men possessed. The Indians went down in swathes before the fury of the attack, and in a very few seconds the late garrison of the butte were reining in their horses amongst the men who had come to save them.

“At ’em, my lads,” roared the officer commanding the cavalry. “Finish ’em off while they’re still staggered.”

In the momentary pause, the cowboys and soldiers had reloaded, while the Indians were still in confusion from the surprise of that terrific charge in the rear. In one great roaring wave, United States cavalry-man and leather-breeched cowboy went forward into battle. War Eagle, the paramount chief, fought with all the fury of despair, but when this leader fell beneath the sword of a trooper, all the fight went out of the rest, and they started to flee for their lives. For a few whirlwind minutes the pursuit harried them, and then a trumpet called the men together again, before the Redskins could rally and attack them piecemeal. But there was no need to worry; the Indians had learned a lesson that they would not forget for years, and they did not draw rein until they were many miles away.

Four troopers and two cowboys had fallen and a score were wounded, but over fifty Indians would raid no more white settlements or massacre white women and children. Graves were dug for the fallen whites, the wounded were bandaged, and the women brought down from the butte. Steve had returned with the rescue-party, and had received a nasty tomahawk wound on the side of his head during the battle, but,

attended by his daughter, was in the best of spirits. Hugh felt himself clapped on the back with a hearty smack that almost knocked him down. With an angry exclamation he recovered himself and found a blue-uniformed trooper grinning at him, hand outstretched.

"Luscombe, by all the powers!" Hugh shouted in delight. "Who'd have thought of meeting you here?"

"Gosh, but I'm glad to see you again, Hugh," said Luscombe, as their hands met. "You have changed a lot since I saw you last. You've got taller and a sight wider in the past eighteen months. Well, this is luck, and it's quite a fluke as well. I was fed-up with routine duty at that wretched fort, where one day's just like another and there's nothing but parades and kit-cleaning to do, when a letter arrived from my father. I told you that the old boy'd give in sooner or later, and he enclosed money for me to buy my discharge and book my passage home. I was actually on the way to see the commanding officer to make my application, when old Steve Rutherford rode in, his horse falling dead as he drew rein. I guessed that something big was going to happen, and I put that application straight back into my pocket. We'd done a lot of scouting and had a couple of tip-and-run skirmishes with Indians, but nothing worth talking about; and now I've had the luck to have been in a regular battle. Now tell me what you've been doing since I left you in M'Kinney?"

But at that moment the trumpet to mount was

blown, and Hugh had to spin his yarn as they rode along. They did not draw rein until the late afternoon, when they reached the banks of the Canadian. It took two days before they rode into one of the outlying ranches, but during that march Hugh and Luscombe had been a lot together and discussed future plans. Luscombe was quite firm in his decision to go home and settle down, and though he begged Hugh to go with him, he refused, saying that he was not returning to England until he was of age and could stand up to his precious uncle at Byrneside.

On the following morning the party broke up, the troops to return to their fort and the cowboys to escort the rescued prisoners back home to Gainsford. That village was already rising from its ashes. Wagon-loads of lumber had been hauled in and the wooden houses were half completed. The reunion with dear ones whom they had despaired of ever seeing again was a terribly affecting scene.

On the way back to the Circle-Triangle, Bronco Harry told Hugh that he expected most of them would be "laid-off" when they returned, though, if he liked to stay on through the winter, he expected that he could persuade the boss to offer him a job. Hugh thanked the veteran cowhand, but said that he was in America only for a short time, and wanted to see as much as possible before he returned to England. He had seen every aspect of a cowboy's life and now wished to move on to something new.

“Waal, you know your own business best, Lightning,” Bronco said; “but it’s a pity to quit now, for another year would make you one of the best hands on the plains.”

“If I remained for another year,” Hugh answered with a smile, “I think that I might stay for good. It is a confoundedly hard life, but it’s a grand one, for all that, so I’d better stop before it gets into my blood.”

So Bill Royce and Hugh duly took their discharge and started for the township of Decatur, where they had heard that a large wagon-train was being mustered to take the trail to Santa Fé. It was composed of several parties which had been waiting until a force large enough to venture crossing the Indian country had assembled. Several wagon-trains were carrying supplies for the troops stationed in the chain of forts along the frontier of civilization; others had goods for Santa Fé, while some had stores and machinery for the mines in New Mexico.

It took Hugh and Bill a week to reach Decatur, and when they did arrive they found that the wagon-train had started two days before. They halted for a day in the town, while they outfitted themselves and bought a pack-horse to carry their stores, and then set out. It was another two days before they caught up with the long train of forty wagons, and, when the leader was pointed out to them, they rode up and offered themselves as scouts and hunters.

The leader took them on at once, glad of the addi-

tion to his fighting strength, especially as he had news that the Redskins were out on the warpath.

"I've got four teams of my own," he said. "You'll find 'em at the end of the line. You may as well join in with them. My cook's better'n average."

Scouting, hunting, keeping a constant watch far out on the flanks of the convoy, Bill and Hugh rode for six weeks as the wagons rolled ponderously across the plains. Nearly every day the two cowboys brought in a couple of deer to add to the provisions, and soon found that they were well liked by everyone, men, women and children, in the train.

It was an arid and level country that they crossed, almost without wood or water, and neither of them was sorry when they reached the four streams which form the north fork of the Colorado River. From this point it was a hundred waterless miles to the Pecos, and everyone looked forward to that dry crossing with the greatest of anxiety. At ordinary times no caravan would have followed this dangerous route, but would had kept much farther north. But the Comanches and the Utes, two powerful Redskin tribes, were on the warpath, and the easier route was too much exposed to their attacks.

Every wagon carried a huge hogshead cask tied behind it, and before they rolled away from the Colorado, these and everything else that would hold liquid were filled with water, so that, with care, there ought to be sufficient to last men and animals for the

five days of the dry crossing. There was no game in this part of the country, so Hugh and Bill rode close in to the wagon-train. These large prairie-schooners, as the covered wagons were called, were hauled by twelve oxen or mules, and often, when crossing the sandhills, it was necessary to use the teams of two wagons to pull one of them through the soft soil. Sometimes even this failed, and the mounted men had to fasten their ropes to the wagons, and haul with their own mounts to drag the heavy vehicles out of the holes into which they had sunk.

"Gosh," said Hugh, after five days of this; "I'd rather fight Indians any day than do this journey again. The heat's terrific and I feel as if I could drink a bucketful of water."

"You'll get plenty of water to-night, Hugh," Bill replied. "The Pecos is a big stream. I think the beasts smell the water already; look how they're pulling! We've been pretty lucky so far, with no sandstorms and no going astray from the trail. We're over the worst of the journey now; except for the Guadeloupe Pass, there ain't much trouble between the Pecos and El Paso. After we reach that place we follow the Rio Grande all the way to Santa Fé."

About noon the going quickened almost to a trot as the ground became harder. With heaving flanks, the oxen and mules strained at the rope traces, while their tongues lolled out and their bloodshot eyes showed how they were longing for the cool stream.

They reached it at sunset, and after that, the remaining days of the journey were quite uneventful until the afternoon when the two partners took their discharge from the wagon-train and rode into El Paso together.

Hugh was very much interested as they took up their quarters in the hotel and saw to the stabling of their horses, for the town was entirely Mexican in appearance, though there were many red-shirted miners and teamsters amongst the olive-skinned Southerners. It was all new to Hugh. He had seen Mexicans before, but he had never seen such finery as the townswomen indulged in. All were dressed in gay colours, with a scarf over their heads, gold pins or ornaments thrust into their hair, while many added necklaces, bracelets and earrings of the same precious metal. Yet, strangely enough, nearly all were barefooted.

Here and there were a few members of the upper classes, half shrouded in black mantillas, wearing the Spanish head-dress so as to almost veil the face. Most of them seemed to be on their way to church, as the pealing of bells filled the air. These ladies carried missal or prayer-book under one arm, while gaily using a fan with the free hand. When Hugh strode back into the hotel yard he found five or six men standing around Prince, and talking together in the greatest excitement, while several more were lounging on the veranda steps. Bill looked uneasy.

"Look out for squalls, Hugh," he said. "There's

trouble in the wind. These Mexicans've got something into their heads, by the way they're looking at us. I wonder if they take us for some toughs who've been holding up a village or doing some horse-stealing?"

"Certainly looks as though something's wrong," Hugh agreed, as they continued to stroll towards the group. The men at once fell silent and stood looking at the two partners as they entered the stable.

"I wish my horse was as good as Prince," said Bill, as soon as they were inside the building. "I'd say bolt, if he was, but they'd catch us before we'd gone very far, with that old plug of mine holding us back."

"It would be madness," said Hugh. "I don't know what these fellows want with us, but, if we bolted, it'd just make them quite certain that their suspicions were correct."

They strolled into the hotel as quietly and calmly as they could, and took their seats at a table placed in the shadow of the front of the house. Both of them were uneasy, not quite knowing what was going to happen, but they sat there talking as if they had not a care in the world.

Bill Royce was the more nervous of the two. Several times Hugh had to lay a restraining hand on the cowboy's sleeve, when he was about to jump up and ask some of the glowering Mexicans who sat surrounding them what they meant by their stares and threatening attitude. Hugh himself, as the minutes passed, became more and more apprehensive, and was glad of

the feel of the six-gun in his holster. Not that it would be much use to him, for a wave of sullen, desperate hatred seemed to be piling up, and the most that he could hope for would be to go down fighting, if they were rushed.

More and more Mexicans kept appearing, until there were nearly a hundred clustered round the hotel, on the sidewalks, at the other tables, or in the stable-yard, and every man of them was armed. The only chance for Bill and Hugh was to appear unconcerned, as though they noticed nothing strange in what was happening, and though their fears mounted with every minute, for the crowd began to get more hostile as its numbers increased, the partners kept an outward appearance of being undisturbed.

Then, suddenly, like flood-waters smashing through a dam, the torrent burst all bounds, and men sprang to their feet. Knives glimmered in the sunshine, revolvers appeared from the holsters and pockets. Hugh and Bill lost not a moment. That lightning-draw of Hugh's brought his deadly six-gun into his hand, and Bill was not far behind in bringing his black pistol-muzzle into line as the Mexican crowd, hatred and blood-lust shining in their distorted faces, surged towards them.

Bill kicked the table over, to give them some protection against a rush.

"Backs to the wall, Hugh!" he shouted, and the two of them stepped back until the bare, windowless

wall of that part of the hotel shielded them from being shot from behind.

"Death to the horse-thieves!" yelled the townsmen. "Death to the murdering cowards! Take them alive, comrades, and let us hang the treacherous dogs!"

Hugh saw that they had been mistaken for some notorious brigands and murderers, and, even as his finger tightened on the trigger, determined to sell his life as dearly as possible, he saw that there was no hope for them. The fury of the crowd was too great for that; the death of the cowboys alone could satisfy them.

CHAPTER XVI

A Mining Expedition

In another split-second the guns of the strangers would have been spitting bullets at the angry, surging townsmen, but a man's voice, high and clear, in purest Spanish, dominated the angry snarling of the mob. A knot of horsemen had ridden into the yard, and the leader, an elderly man, obviously a great noble or rich landowner, called for silence. Everyone seemed to know him, for it was accorded at once. Bill and Hugh, desperate-eyed, keyed-up for the fate that was snatching at them, paused in amazement and allowed their fingers to relax from the straining triggers, though they still kept their yawning muzzles trained unwaveringly upon their enemies. Behind the elder man rode a lad of eighteen or so, who looked like his son, with half a dozen heavily armed Mexican vaqueros, native cowboys, to support him. Even as the old man raised his hand, a party of Civil Guards, military police, carrying their carbines, came trotting into the yard, to range themselves behind him.

"Señors," said the rider, in very good English, looking at Hugh and Bill; "I understand that you have just arrived in El Paso. Is that correct?"

"It is, señor," answered Hugh; "we came in with the wagon-train from Texas. Is there anything wrong in our having done so?"

"Nothing at all," answered the caballero. "What is wrong is that one of you was riding a horse which once belonged to my son, Don Estefan Perales."

So that was it! They were mistaken for horse-thieves!

"Do you mean the roan, señor?" Hugh asked.

The Mexican nodded his head silently.

"I purchased that horse at M'Kinney, a small town in the north-east of Texas," Hugh said.

"May I ask from whom you bought it?" the man asked courteously.

"Certainly, señor. I paid for it and took it from two men whom I had never seen before," Hugh replied.

At this there were loud shouts from the mob, and another ugly surge forward, which the old man stopped with one imperious wave of his hand. Two men in particular, who did not look like Mexicans, one a tall, powerfully-built fellow of about fifty, and the other a small, slightly-built, white-haired man, seemed to be anxious to push their way through the crowd, who were now howling that Hugh had lied, and demanding his blood. To the surprise of the cornered cowboys, the two new arrivals ranged themselves alongside, unholstered their guns, and faced the milling mob. The big man spoke in the Mexican dialect.

"Softly, softly, señors, softly. You're neither judges nor jury in this here case, and my mate and I're going to see fair play."

"Have no fears, friends," said the old gentleman on his horse. "Justice is all that I ask, and I will allow no violence. The matter is, after all, a simple one. The strangers have just ridden into town with a horse that once belonged to my son, Estefan. He rode away from here with three servants and a party going to Texas, upwards of eighteen months ago. He had business in New York, and also wished to spend a few weeks hunting in Texas on his way north, before he went to the rail-head and caught a train for the city. From the day he started we have never heard from him. Some of the party with which he started have returned long since; they say that Estefan was with them until they had passed the Bad Lands and then left them, to carry out his intention of hunting. He never arrived in New York and we have never heard anything about him since. Now these strangers arrive on the horse which he rode when he left. I think that I have a right to make inquiries."

"You certainly have, señor," Hugh said. "The men from whom I bought the horse were strangers, and I did not like the look of them. To make sure that I should never be blamed for having become possessed of so fine a horse by dishonest means, I had this receipt for the money I paid them witnessed by the sheriff and a leading citizen of M'Kinney." Hugh

paused while he drew out the receipt, which he unfolded and passed up to the old man.

He glanced at the paper, and then smiled.

"Will you accept my apologies, señor?" he said. "Explain this, Carlos, to these good townsmen and ask them to leave. I thank them for the love they have shown towards my absent son, but I do not need their services any longer. Now, gentlemen," turning to Hugh and Bill, who had holstered their guns, the danger being over, "I should be greatly obliged if you would allow me to have further talk with you."

The two miners, for that is what they looked like by their dress, started to move away, but Hugh turned to them and thanked them from the bottom of his heart for their courage and goodness in offering to stand by them in what might have been a fight to the death. Hugh asked them to join Bill and himself later in the evening, to be his guests at the hotel.

"There are no thanks due," said the big man. "My mate and I knew nothing of the affair, but you're two of our own colour and we wasn't going to allow no Mexes to lynch white men without seeing that you got a chance to have fair play. Thanks for your invite, cowboy. Guess you can expect us later."

The little man nodded his agreement, and they walked away.

Hugh turned to the Mexican gentleman. "Now, señor," he said, "we are at your service."

"My name is Don Ramon Perales," he replied.

"My hacienda lies three miles away, but as this hotel is hardly the place for quiet conversation, may I ask if you would care to take the trouble to mount your horses and to accompany me to my home? I am most anxious to learn all particulars of the men from whom you bought the horse."

Hugh bowed and accepted.

As they rode along, Hugh turned to Don Ramon and said with a smile, as he looked at the party of heavily armed vaqueros trotting behind them:

"You certainly came with a strong force, señor."

"It might have been necessary. I did not know with whom I had to deal. The Civil Guards do not care to risk their skins if they can help it against Texas gunmen. I could not know that I should have to do with gentlemen."

"Aw, shucks!" said Bill Royce with a grin. "I'm a cowboy, or a teamster, or a miner, or anything that comes to hand, but I certainly ain't no gentleman."

"Bill's my very good friend and comrade," broke in Hugh. "I'm an Englishman who has come out here to see life for himself, and to do some hunting before I go back and settle down at home."

As they rode along Don Ramon asked if he might question them, and when Hugh smilingly agreed to do his best to help in every way possible, the Mexican asked him to describe the men from whom he had bought Prince. Hugh did his best, and by the time he

had finished, the old man was certain that his son had been murdered for the sake of the cash he was carrying with him to pay for his journey.

They reached the hacienda, a large and handsome building standing in extensive grounds. A number of *peons*, native servants of the peasant class, came running to meet them and took the horses. Prince had quickened his pace as they neared the place, and had given a snort of delighted recognition. When Hugh dismounted, Prince, as usual, laid his muzzle on his shoulder for the customary caress, and then, without waiting for a *peon* to take his rein, trotted off to the stables.

"You must have been a kind master to him, señor," said Don Ramon, "for he seems to be very fond of you."

"I love horses," Hugh answered; "and Prince has been my companion, night and day, for eighteen months."

Don Ramon led the way into the house and then into a large room, where he introduced the friends to his wife and two daughters. The old lady asked what news there was of the missing boy, and the Don explained what had happened. For an hour Hugh remained answering the questions they asked them, and then, feeling that they wanted to be left alone in their grief now that their anxiety had been changed to sad certainty, the cowboys rose and left, Don Ramon and his son seeing them to the gates.

"Will you please send a vaquero into town with us, señor?" Hugh asked the Don.

"Certainly," the old gentleman answered, puzzled. "If you need one, but the town is straight in front of you, you cannot miss your way."

"I don't need a guide," Hugh answered, "but I shall want someone to bring Prince back to you."

"Prince back to me? Why should one of my servants bring the horse here?"

"He was your son's," Hugh said simply, almost choking on the words. "He does not belong to me, and I cannot keep your property."

A kindly smile streamed across the lined old face and a light shone in the tired eyes. "Señor," he said, "I see that you are a gentleman of blood and breed. Kindly accept the horse as my gift to a very gallant man. There are many thousands of horses running on my estates, and though Estefan used to say that there was not one equal to Prince, I am sure that there are many which are little inferior. They are all mustangs crossed with pure Arabs which my grandfather selected in Andalusia and had shipped over here. The horse loves you and I shall be glad if you will accept him as a memorial of my son. I have also taken the liberty of ordering my *peons* to change your saddle for one that is more worthy of you."

Hugh and Bill took their leave of the kindly old man, who asked them to remember, if they would, to deal with the two horse-thieves if ever they met with

them, and both promised that they would do their utmost to deal out justice.

When they got back to the hotel their reception was very different from what they had met before. The *gringos*, that is, white men, had been the guests of Don Ramon at his hacienda, and that altered everything. The two miners who had stood by them, joined them at their dinner, taking seats beside them.

"You had a pretty rough welcome to El Paso," said the big man. "Say, I don't know what to call you. I'm Sim, generally known as Surly Sim, and this is my mate, Frank, usually called the Doctor."

"My name's Bill," said Royce, "generally mentioned as Chunky on the plains. This is Hugh, whom the cowboys christened Lightning."

"That's a strange name," the little white-haired man said. "How'd you get it, and what does it mean?"

"Because he's got the most lightning draw with his six-gun that I've ever seen," explained Bill. "Before you've seen his hand move, you're looking down the tube of his pistol."

"A very useful accomplishment," said the Doctor, very quiet and still. "I'm a peaceable man myself, and have a horror of firearms."

Sim burst into laughter.

"You know that that's true, Sim," said the Doctor reproachfully.

"Guess that for a peaceable man I've never known a man who's used his gun more," Sim roared.

"But always on the side of peace and justice, Sim, always on the side of peace," the Doctor persisted, hurt reproach in his gentle voice.

"Yeah, Doc," snorted Sim; "in just the same way that a New York cop uses his club."

"I assure you that I seldom use my so-called accomplishment," Hugh protested. "Except for a battle or two with the Indians, I've only once had to make a quick draw, and that was to save my life."

There was something about the little white-haired man that drove Hugh to make it quite clear that he was no rampaging gunman looking for trouble.

"What're you two doing in El Paso?" Sim demanded abruptly.

"You're too abrupt, Sim," said the Doctor, "much too abrupt."

"Not at all," said Hugh, and explained how they happened to have come.

"Well, if you want adventure," grunted Sim, "you can find it mining down in Arizona. Me'n the Doc been there for years, and about all that we've done is to save our scalps, and we're lucky to be able to say that much."

"I was told that El Paso was the jumping-off place for plenty of prospecting expeditions," Hugh said. "I thought that I might be allowed to join up with one and so get a taste of that life."

"It ain't no time for prospecting," Sim answered. "Even on the Upper Gila, and that's supposed to be

safe at ordinary times, every man's on guard for an Apache raid. A man'd have to be wonderful fond of gold to go prospecting just at present down in Arizona."

They sat for hours talking over goldmines and prospecting, while the two elder men told them a score of yarns about things they had heard, seen and done in the twelve years they'd been in partnership. Suddenly the Doctor turned to his partner:

"Strikes me, Sim, that these two men'd make good mates for that job of ours."

"Waal, I leave these things to you," answered Sim. "You ain't often wrong in weighing-up a man, and I kinder likes the pair of 'em, too. It comes to this," turning to Hugh; "if you're disposed to make a joint expedition with us, and ain't afeared of roughing it, nor of Redskins, meet us three miles outside the town on the South Road and we'll talk to you straight."

"Suits me," answered Hugh. "What about you, Bill?"

"If you're going, Hugh, you can count me in," the cowboy said.

The two miners bade them good night shortly afterwards, and when they had gone Hugh turned eagerly to his chum and asked him what he thought about it.

"Guess I don't think much about it one way nor the other," Bill answered. "Miners and prospectors always have some pet yarn of their own. However, they seem straight men, so far's I can see."

Next morning, they rode out at half-past eight, and found the two miners at the appointed place. As the miners saw them approaching they turned off the road and led them towards a Mexican hut that stood some distance back.

"There's no fear of our being overheard in here," the Doctor said, as they entered the place and sat down. "Now, I'll tell you our plans and how we came to form them.

"A year ago Sim and I were working in a gulch in the mountains and happened to pick up a man who had been lost and was almost dead. We carried him to our fire, and looked after him for three weeks until he died. He told us that he had been one of a party of six who had been prospecting on the Lower Gila. One of them had learned from an Indian that the bed of a certain stream was almost solid gold, and the party found it, but the next morning they were attacked by a party of Apaches who must have been following them for some time. Two of the prospectors were killed at once, the rest got to their horses and rode for their lives. Three of them were shot down, but the man we picked up had got clear away, though they chased him for three days. He lost his way; his horse fell dead, but he managed to struggle along until he saw our fire and made us out to be whites.

"Before he died, he gave us directions and bearings to find the place. He said that there was no doubt about the amount of gold, and he must have been

telling the truth, for he had four nuggets in his pocket, all of pure gold and each one weighing over two pounds. He said that he had had lots of bigger ones, but had thrown them away to lighten his horse.

"It's a long journey, and it'll take at least a month to get there. We can't make a bee-line because of the Apaches; we'll have to go north by way of the Moquis' country, and enter again from that side. We've been minded to try it ever since we first heard the yarn, but two men ain't enough for such a journey, and there's plenty with whom Sim and I wouldn't want to make it."

There and then they sat down, pooled their money, and decided to buy an outfit with pack-horses, a task given to the Doctor who, Sim said, was the best man at a bargain in all the south-west. The Doctor told them that they would have to exercise the greatest care in leaving El Paso in case they were seen moving out with pack animals, in which case dozens would follow on their trail to see where they were going, and to try and snatch their prize from them.

"You'll hear from us in less than a week," Sim told them. "Remember, we must be mighty careful. There's some bands of brigands in the hills, and there's plenty of toughs in El Paso who'd slip them word if they knew that a well-provisioned train of men and pack animals was heading out. Things are pretty bad just now. Three big haciendas have been burned down and their people run off for ransom, and the troops

and Guards seem to be useless in tracing the brigands."

Hugh and Bill left the two miners and rode back to El Paso. Next morning, in reply to Don Ramon's invitation, Hugh rode over to the hacienda, Bill saying that the place was too swell for him and deciding to stay in town. Hugh had a wonderful time in the big house and revelled in the feeling of being in the midst of comfort once again. The conversation, naturally, turned upon the brigands. Don Carlos, the son, rode over part of the estate with Hugh, showing him the *peons* working on the tobacco plantations, the corn-fields and the other crops of grain.

"It's a disgrace that these brigands are not hunted down," snorted Don Carlos. "They've been very daring lately, and my father and some of the other larger landowners have put in a powerful complaint to the authorities at Santa Fé, saying what they think of the inactivity of the Civil Guards in this district. I have done my best to persuade my father to move into El Paso, to our town house, until the brigands have been captured, but he just laughs and says that there is no danger. We have twenty armed *peons* sleeping in the outhouse and twelve good menservants, all trained to weapons, in the house itself, and there can be very little danger of our being attacked. Still, with my mother and sisters out here, I can't help feeling anxious."

Don Ramon would not hear of Hugh's returning to El Paso that evening, but insisted upon his remaining

to sleep in the hacienda. After an evening in the bosom of the family, Hugh felt a weariness of his hard life stealing over him, and almost made up his mind to return to England as soon as possible—but the thought of that scoundrelly uncle of his held him back.

When he got back to the hotel on the following morning, a ragged Mexican boy ran up and pressed a letter into his hand, and at once darted away.

“It is from the Doctor,” Hugh said to Bill, and read:

“‘I have something of the greatest urgency to tell you. Stroll quietly through the town as though you were looking at the shops. When you reach the river follow it until you hear three whistles, and then come to the place from which you have heard them. Better be alone. The Doctor.’”

Hugh obeyed the instructions exactly, and was soon with the Doctor, whom he found concealed in a clump of bushes. After he had made sure that he had not been seen, Hugh stepped into the thick cover.

“Those confounded Mexicans are on to our plans,” the Doctor said quickly.

“How’ve they managed that?”

The little man groaned. “Sim again! He’s an excellent fellow, and the loyalest and best of partners, but he’s too fond of the bottle on occasions. Not very often, but occasionally, he gets the craving, and then nothing can stop him. It came on him last night. I thought it best to look after him, so I took him to a

little wine-shop, and found half a dozen tough-looking Mexes there, who looked as though they would like to murder us, and I saw that they all seemed to know us.

"I decided to find out what they were talking about, as I had an idea that it was about us. Sim and I staged a fierce quarrel, and I left him while he pretended to get properly soaked in liquor. The Mexes got into talk with him, and started to try and pump him. Sim pretended to get more and more stupid until he made a fake of collapsing. One of the Mexicans came across, ran his hands through Sim's pockets and stole the few dollars he was carrying. After that they were sure that he was unconscious, and they started to speak freely between themselves.

"Sim listened and found out that they were spies of the brigands in the hills. They know all about you and the matter of the horse, and one of them heard everything we discussed in the hut about the gold. When we start, we are to be trailed by a powerful gang of brigands, who will murder us when we have led them to the gold."

Hugh whistled, and then heard the Doctor say that it would be better to stay in El Paso for the time.

"How many are there in this gang?" Hugh asked.

"Over twenty, and the two leaders are the men who sold Prince to you, after they had murdered Don Estefan. They have sworn to wipe out both you and the whole family of Don Ramon."

CHAPTER XVII

Carried Off

Hugh sat silent. Don Ramon and his family had been so kind and hospitable to him, that he felt it a duty, apart from the fresh threat made against himself, to help them to obtain justice for the cruel wrong the brigand leaders had done them.

"Have you any idea where the brigands have their headquarters, Doctor?" he asked.

"I've got a faint idea," the little man replied. "At any rate, I know one place where there's a party of men who don't care much about being disturbed by strangers. Two or three months ago Sim and I were about forty miles away to the north-west. We stayed in a village at the mouth of a valley, and the girl who waited upon us at the wine-shop whispered in my ear, when the back of the landlord was turned for a moment, warning me not to go up the valley. We'd had no intention of going there—it was only a sort of gulch leading nowhere—but after that we just naturally had to go and have a look. We took a goodish round so's to get above it, and when we looked down we saw a house lying amongst some trees, and farther down the

valley we made out a couple of men keeping guard as they sat on the rocks with rifles on their knees.

"The sun shone on their rifle-barrels, but that don't mean much, of course, when you remember that all Mexicans go about armed to the teeth. We watched them for a couple of hours and as they didn't move we were sure that they were sentries. The girl wouldn't have given us that warning unless there'd been something very wrong, and I reckon that the house was the headquarters of some brigand gang."

The Doctor paused, and then said: "Now, lad, you'd best be getting back. I'll stay here for a couple of hours in case there's anyone watching, as is likely enough. If word comes through of a planned attack upon the hacienda I'll let you know."

Hugh returned to the hotel and told Bill of what he had heard.

"Suits me fine," Bill said grimly. "I hate these Border ruffians, and if ever I saw two of 'em, 'twas those fellows who sold you the horse in M'Kinney. So it's their intention to trail us and wipe us out, is it? We'll see about that when the time comes. If I was you, Hugh, I'd ride over to Don Ramon and give him the tip to be on his guard. I expect he'll be interested to know that the murderers of his son are in the neighbourhood. Just go jogging along as though your visit to the hacienda warn't of no particular importance. The spies ain't got no other interest in us 'cept for the gold, and they won't consarn them-

selves with your movements so long as I stay here in the hotel and the others show no sign of making a move."

As the sun was sinking in the western sky Hugh set out, so that it was dark when he reached the hacienda. He took an opportunity to draw Don Ramon aside and gave him his news. The old man tensed when he heard that the killers of his son were so close, and told a servant who was passing to bring his son, Don Carlos. Briefly, he told him to summon his mother and sisters, and to see that they were safely in the house.

Hugh stood talking to the old gentleman, and when a quarter of an hour later Carlos came up and said that he could not find his sisters, Don Ramon strode over to a table and struck a little bell on the table.

"Rosita," he said to the servant who appeared; "go to the ladies' room and tell the señoritas that Mr. Hugh Tunstall is here with us."

"They are not there, master," she answered. "I have just come down from their room."

"Where on earth can they be, Carlos?" Don Ramon exclaimed.

"I've no idea, Father," he replied; "though I heard them call Lion from outside, and I saw him get up and dash through the open window to join them."

"I can't understand it," the father exclaimed. "It's quite chilly this evening; besides, they would scarcely go out of the garden after nightfall."

"They may be down at Chaquita's cottage," Don Carlo suggested.

"Of course," said Don Ramon, and Hugh saw the relief in his face. "They often visit their old nurse, Mr. Tunstall," he explained. "Rosita," turning back to the servant who had waited with growing anxiety for his orders; "tell Juan to go down to Chaquita's cottage and ask the young ladies to return, as I want to speak with them."

In ten minutes the girl was back.

"They are not there, señor. Chaquita said that they left just as it began to grow dark."

Doña Maria had now come in. "What's all the trouble?" she asked. "You look very anxious, Ramon."

He told her that he wanted to see his daughters, but they seemed to have disappeared. His wife laughed.

"That is nothing to be uneasy about. The girls are often out as late as this on a moonlit evening. Perhaps they are in the garden."

But they were not. They walked down every path while Don Ramon called their names each few paces. A number of the men joined them, bringing torches to help in the search. A man came running out of a large shrubbery.

"Blood, Don Ramon," he called. "There's blood, fresh blood on the path!"

They ran forward; fifty yards farther on, two more men were standing with torches in their hands.

"Here it is," one said. "We passed it without

noticing it on our way down to the cottage, but coming back the light of the torches fell upon it."

Don Ramon, ashen-faced and speechless with horror and anxiety, stood staring at the baleful pool. "There are signs of a struggle here," Hugh said, after examining the ground. "See! several marks of booted feet. Some of them have trodden in the blood. Look, señor," he finished, pointing to a line of ruddy drops leading to one of the bushes.

"Search, Hugh," groaned Carlos; "I dare not."

Hugh motioned one of the torch-bearers to follow him, while father and son stood gazing in fearful anxiety as the two searchers entered the bushes. A moment later Hugh called back:

"It is the dog, señors. There is nothing else here."

An exclamation of joy came from both the men as they were relieved from the overpowering dread which gripped them. They joined Hugh at once, finding him standing beside a noble Cuban bloodhound which had been stabbed in a dozen places.

"What can it mean?" Don Carlos asked, his voice trembling.

"I daren't think," quavered his father, passing a hand over his forehead.

"It's only too evident, I'm afraid," Hugh said simply. "The brigands dared not attack the hacienda, but have carried off your two daughters. This hound died in their defence."

Father and son groaned and seemed incapable of

movement. Meanwhile Hugh searched around. "The ruffians were in hiding here," he said, "and seized and gagged the señoritas before they had time to scream. The hound must have sprung at them and been killed by their knives."

At Hugh's suggestion they followed the tracks down to the road, while one of the servants ran and brought the chief huntsman. This tracker stopped before he reached the junction of the path with the road, pointed out fresh hoof-marks, and then showed them how the attack had been made.

"My brain seems to be on fire and I cannot think," faltered old Don Ramon, upon whom the disaster seemed to have acted like a bludgeon-blow. "Tell me what you think is the best thing to be done."

"I don't think that the señoritas are in any immediate danger," Hugh answered. "I expect that they have been kidnapped for ransom. The villains got at least two hours' start and any pursuit is hopeless in the darkness. You may either go down to the town and raise a posse of vaqueros while you wait for the soldiers to come to your aid, or you may stay here until you receive a ransom demand from the brigands."

"Let us go back to the house and talk things over," said Don Ramon, who had now regained a little control over himself. "We must do nothing that might endanger the poor girls' lives."

Doña Maria, prostrated with grief, and surrounded

by weeping women-servants wringing their hands and semi-hysterical, was taken away to her room.

"Now, tell us what you think," Don Carlos said to Hugh, when the three men were alone together. "Of course we shall pay any ransom that they demand, but it is awful to think of the girls being in the hands of these ruffians who murdered my brother."

"I should advise you to pay the ransom," Hugh said. "We cannot risk the lives of the señoritas by refusing anything the scoundrels demand. I believe that I have a clue to the place where your sisters have been taken, and, as soon as they are free from the brigands, we must be in a position to fall upon the gang and wipe these kidnapping brutes clean out. I will ride back to El Paso and see what my friends there think about it."

Don Ramon promised to let him know, instantly, any fresh developments.

It was after ten o'clock when Hugh reached the hotel, but it was a night of fiesta, and the square was still thronged with people, while all the cafés and wine-shops were open. He asked Bill if he could find Sim and the Doctor.

"They were sitting in front of that wine-shop over there less than ten minutes ago," Bill answered.

"Come along then, Bill."

"Say, I thought the orders were that we were not to be seen with them," Bill protested.

"Come along!" Hugh said grimly.

"What's happened?" Bill asked, as he hurried after Hugh. "You look as though there's something in the wind."

But Hugh just repeated for the third time his "Come along," as he pushed his way through the merry-making crowds. In a couple of minutes he saw his two friends sitting at a table. He threw himself into an empty chair, while Bill followed suit. Hugh nodded carelessly to the Doctor and Sim, and sat down beside them.

"I want to talk to you badly. There are too many people about here. D'you mind stepping down to the river. I'll tell you what's happened as we go."

Directly they were out of the thronged square he gave the news.

"Carried off those two young ladies!" Bill exclaimed. "By thunder, I'll have their hides for that. What are we going to do about it?"

"Let's just wait until we know all about it," said Sim, while the Doctor, in a high, dreamy voice, as though he were speaking in a trance, said: "This must really be stopped. Wait until we get down to the river, Lightning; we've got to hear all this quietly, and four men can't talk as they walk."

Hugh told them of what had happened, and of Don Ramon's determination to pay whatever sum was demanded rather than to risk any harm coming to his daughters.

"That's all very well," said the Doctor; "but once

they get the money the gang will scatter and there won't be one of them in the district twelve hours after the girls are freed."

"But what can Don Ramon do, Doctor?" Hugh asked. "He daren't move until he gets the girls. The brigands will cut their throats if he tries anything. Maybe this is the work of the gang who live in that valley of which you were speaking this morning. Couldn't we be in hiding near it, and the instant the men come back with the ransom and release the girls, fall upon them, destroy the whole lot, and get the money back?"

"We'd want a big force to surround that place properly," Sim replied; "and we couldn't get it there without its being seen. You can bet that there's at least a score of the brigands on the look-out, and, even if there wasn't, their spies right here in El Paso would bring them word of what was in the wind. Besides that, there ain't no certainty that the gals is really hidden in that place."

"What about going and finding out for ourselves?" Hugh asked. "If it is, one of us can come back and warn Don Ramon to bring along a bunch of his own men, or to get the soldiers from the fort. The moment we know that he's coming, we could crawl down to the house, get into a position from which we would be able to protect the girls, say in their room, and then hold out until Don Ramon arrives with help. The brigands'll be so busy with us that they won't be looking out for anything else."

"Sounds a mighty fine plan, by thunder," ejaculated Sim Howlett. "What d'you say, Doctor?"

"I think that it might be worked out something on those lines," said the Doctor; "and without too much danger for the ladies, because if we happen to be unlucky and fall foul of the brigands some of them would attack us while the rest would carry the prisoners off to some new hiding-place. One thing, though; don't let's leave El Paso together. Each man make his own way out and we'll meet outside. We know that we're being watched, and we can't be too careful."

They elaborated their plans still further, worked out a big detour they would make, so that no spy would think that they were heading for the brigand hide-out, and also fixed a rendezvous where they should all meet. When everything was arranged they split up, every man to do the share which had been allotted to him. An hour later, Hugh, with a six-gun in his holster, and a rifle over the front arch of his saddle, left the lights of El Paso behind him, and headed out into the darkness to face peril in the hills.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Brigands' Haunt

By daybreak, all four riders were far among the hills, heading for the secret meeting-place, which was just outside that village at the foot of the valley where the serving-wench in the wine-shop had warned Sim and the Doctor not to look into the secrets of the place. As Hugh rode up, he found the other three waiting for him in a clump of trees.

"The village is three miles away," said the Doctor. "The gorge in which the house lies is just off to the left. You can't see it from here; it's a sort of canyon cut out of the hillside years ago when there were glaciers here. The sides are nearly perpendicular, but it widens out at the farther end, which is considerably higher than this, and I don't believe that there should be any difficulty in reaching it by way of the path the brigands use. We've got to work down through those woods over to the left, and come out back of them. We shouldn't be seen, even if they've got sentries on the high ground above the house. They'll all be looking the other way, out across the plain where they can see for miles."

They dismounted in the trees and rested there for the rest of the day and the night following. When they saw the new dawn through the thickly clustered trunks, they made a move. Securing their animals, they crept forward, crossed a little clearing on hands and knees, and took up a position on the fringe of another patch of thick forest.

"We're about half a mile from the house," the Doctor said. "Now what happens? Shall we all go forward, or shall one of us go on and scout?"

Hugh was silent; these men understood things much better than he did.

"Just one, of course, Doctor," said Sim. "It'd only be chucking away lives for all of us to go. The others can wait here and lend a hand if that one is chased. Now, who goes, you or me, Doc?"

"Why shouldn't Bill or I have the chance?" asked Hugh.

Sim grinned. "Quite a variety of reasons, Lightning," he said kindly. "In the first place, either of you, being younger than us, could leg it a lot faster if you were seen, but I guess we don't want that scout to be seen. The Doctor and I both know more about silent creeping and crawling than you do. What's more, we both speak Mex, and can reassure the young ladies before they squawk and raise the alarm. It ain't likely that they'll be allowed out on the veranda, and we can't go peeking through each of the windows till we find the right one. Ears, not eyes, is what we'll

have to use, to find out where they are. So, you see, it must be either the Doctor or me for the job."

"It's me for it, Sim," said the Doctor. "I can go as lightly as a cat, and I haven't a third of your bulk to hide. I'm cunning while you're strong, and in this case, I guess, cunning is what is most wanted. Let me have your six-shooter. I may want twelve bullets to throw around. That's right; thank you. Now just hang on here," he continued. "I may be away for a good while, as I shan't try to reach the house until after dark, though I'm going to spend the whole day stretching my ears." With silent step, not brushing a twig or a leaf, as quiet as any Redskin, the little man disappeared amongst the tree trunks.

Sim spent the day telling them yarns of the things the Doctor had done in suppressing lawlessness, and both sat in amazement when they heard of the lion-like deeds of that frail little man.

Darkness fell, and the moon came up before the Doctor reappeared. The other three had been straining their ears for any sound, but not one of them heard him until he stood silently in front of them, a soft chuckle on his lips.

"The señoritas are there all right," he said. "Let's get back to the horses before we talk." Without another word they crept back to the animals, which had been fed and watered during the long hours. As soon as they were deep in the wood, the Doctor squatted down on his heels and lit a pipe.

"There was precious little danger about that job," the Doctor said scornfully. "It doesn't seem to have occurred to those idiots that anyone was likely to come down from this end of the gulch. They've got two sentries down at the valley entrance and two on each side of the heights, and I reckon that they'll have some more down towards the village. Anyhow, I saw no one until I got down close to the house.

"It's as strong as a castle; stands on a table of rock jutting out from the hillside; on three sides it goes straight down, but there's a sort of terrace right round the house, between the walls and the edge of the precipice, about fifty feet wide. On the side towards the hill there's a twelve-foot wall with a strong gate in the middle, and to make quite sure, all the windows on this side have been bricked up. I reckon the house is lit by windows opening on to a centre courtyard; what they call a patio. So you may see that it's a mighty difficult place to take all of a sudden.

"I could hear five or six men talking as they sat and smoked outside the house door, which is on the far side, away from the hill. When the house was built there must have been stairs up the face of the rock, for a road leads right to the foot of it from down the valley. I crawled round that way and saw that I was right; I found several blocks of stone still in position, while the holes to which the other stairs had been fastened made it possible to climb up that way.

"The moon wasn't up when I reached the top and

raised my head just over the edge, so I pulled myself up, crawled round the corner of the house and examined all the windows on that side, and then crawled back to the top of the broken steps and began to listen. The girls are there all right. They'd been brought there straight away after being kidnapped, and a man left the next morning to carry the ransom demand to Don Ramon. He's expected back some time to-night. They had news that the Don was not yet taking any steps to raise the money, though the news of the kidnapping was already well known.

"I crawled away again, managed to rope a balcony, and got into the house," the Doctor went on coolly, as though he were describing some game he had played. "Down in the courtyard there were three men near a lantern, smoking cigarettes and talking about what they intended doing with their share of the ransom. Two more were sitting on a bench drawn across a door. That was all I wanted to know—the room in which the girls are held captive. It's on the corner facing down the valley, that is, the western angle of the building. I made tracks when I had discovered all this, and here I am."

They talked over what should be done. Hugh was all for an immediate attack, to creep down, get themselves into the house, reach the girls' room and then fight until reinforcements, summoned by the man who should go for them, arrived and rescued them. But the Doctor would not allow it.

"No," he said. "We should never manage it. Three men make more noise than one, and we'd never get into the house without raising an alarm. We have no right to risk the young ladies' lives. This is a matter for the Don himself to decide, and I guess that Lightning and I'd better go and see him, while you two keep watch on what happens in the valley."

When they had saddled up, the Doctor, taking Bill's horse as being better than his own, said:

"It'll be two or three days before we're back, Sim."

"No matter, there's no hurry," came the reply. "There'll be a deal of talk about how and when the ransom's to be paid, before anything happens."

At noon the next day Hugh rode through the gates of the hacienda, and told the Don what he and his partners had discovered. He then explained the scheme proposed for the rescue of the girls. Don Ramon, his wife, and his son were greatly moved by Hugh's tale, and thanked him in broken words for all that he had done.

"The risk is too terrible," the Don said. "If you should fail it will cost you your lives, and my daughters will be slaughtered as well."

"Do not worry about us, Don Ramon," Hugh answered. "We can look after ourselves. If we are discovered before we reach your daughters' room, the brigands will think that it is an effort on our part to win a reward for ourselves by rescuing them and

returning them to you. I do not think the ruffians will risk losing their ransom by doing them any harm, and as for us, well, we can fight our way out again. You see, our idea is that the force which we want you to bring shall not advance until they hear our signal of three regularly spaced shots, which will mean that we have actually reached the señoritas' apartments, and in that case you will push forward at once to help us. If, on the other hand, you hear an irregular flurry of firing, you will know that we have been discovered, and you will retreat without showing yourselves, so as not to make a bad business any worse. You will then be able to return to El Paso and continue your negotiations for a ransom."

"It must not be attempted if in any way I can recover my girls by the simple payment of a ransom," Don Ramon insisted, and would have said more, but a servant entered at that moment and handed him a letter. He tore it open and read aloud:

" 'Señor—if you want your daughters back again, you must trust us; we can give no guarantees beyond our solemn pledge. Tell my messenger on what day to collect the money, and you must not delay more than one week; on that day he will come to fetch it. See that he is not followed, for any attempt at rescue will mean your daughters' deaths. Your daughters will be returned twenty-four hours after you have made payment.' "

Don Ramon slowly crushed the paper in his hand.

"We will try your plan, Señor Hugh," he said quietly. "I see now that these villains mean to make me pay, and then to kill my poor girls. They have no intention of keeping faith with me."

"But why should they?" Hugh asked.

"That I cannot tell," the Don answered tight-lipped. "Perhaps from sheer evil joy in killing, or to prevent their descriptions being given by my daughters after they are released. They must know that I shall never rest content until I have avenged the suffering they have inflicted upon my family, and they will take their own measures to keep their identity secret."

"Then what do you propose, sir?"

"I shall write and say that, though their conditions are very hard to fulfil, I shall do what they wish. I shall tell them, however, that it is almost impossible to collect so large a sum in gold at such short notice, and ask for a few extra days until they send their messenger to collect it. That will give us the time we need to collect troops and to carry out your plan."

Don Ramon wrote the letter and handed it over to the messenger, who was standing in the hall, surrounded by sullen-eyed servants only too anxious to seize and torture him until he betrayed the hiding-place of their young ladies.

The plan as outlined by the Doctor was pushed ahead. The commandant of the fort agreed to send an officer and twenty soldiers, the Doctor acting as guide, to

a point thirty miles farther along the river. They travelled by night, and it was hoped that they had left unobserved. Not that that mattered greatly, for at that spot they were still quite as far from the brigands' lair as they had been at El Paso. The next nightfall they were to cross the river and make a rendezvous with the Don and his party. Hugh rode with him to within a few miles from the village of Ajanco, whence the combined sections would strike into the hills, rest there all day, and, moving after sunset, arrive at the gulch above the prison-house after dark.

Everything went according to plan. The rendezvous was kept outside Ajanco. Don Ramon, his son and four of his vaqueros were with Hugh when they met the Doctor and the troops. Lieutenant Mason was the officer in command, and he seemed to be a cheery, capable fellow to whom Hugh took an instant liking. The Doctor had drawn Juan, the Don's principal servant, aside, as the man came from this part of the country, and the two of them held a long consultation. A start was made at last, and, branching off along a by-path, three hours later they were deep within the hills. Once again they quitted the track and, riding into a small ravine, off-saddled and settled down for a rest. By ten o'clock they were on the move again and rode until two, when they came near to the valley in which stood the brigands' lair. At dusk they remounted, and soon were in the depths of the wood, where they were welcomed by Bill and Sim.

"I thought you might be here last night, boys," said Sim; "but I hardly thought you'd make it."

"Is there any news of my daughters?" demanded Don Ramon.

"Nary a word," Sim assured him. "We've kept a strict watch over the comings and goings down below. There've been a lot of men moving in the valley, and I reckon that there must be nigh on thirty in the house right now. It looks as though their bosses were scared of treachery and were keeping their men together so as to have an eye on 'em. What're your ideas, Doctor? Same as you detailed before you left?"

The Doctor nodded. "Just the same, Sim. We four and Don Carlos here are to try and get to the ladies. When we manage it, three shots fired slowly and in regular time are to be the signal. Then, when they hear them, Don Ramon and the troops will rush down to give us a hand."

Don Ramon had been very anxious to be one of the attacking party, but the Doctor steadfastly refused to have him. "It wouldn't be any good," he said, "and would only add to our risks. If we five can reach the young ladies we can easily keep the brigands at bay until you arrive with the soldiers. In fact, I'd rather have gone without your son, but, as Lightning seems to have promised him that he shall be allowed to come with us, I won't stand out against it. On a job like this the fewer men the better; every additional one only adds to the risk."

The little man gave some last directions to Lieutenant Mason, impressing upon him how vitally necessary it was that he and his men should keep in hiding, not letting the brigands gain the faintest inkling of the threat hanging so closely over them. He wound up by saying:

“ We’ve said all along that we might be able to get the ladies out by ourselves, but, again, we mayn’t manage it. But we can defend them easily enough if we can reach their room. If we are discovered before we can do that, we’ll just have to fall back fighting, and then, for the sake of the young ladies, the brigands must have no idea that soldiers are at hand. They will think that we are only a small party, and the señoritas will be none the worse.”

Don Ramon, his face showing the terrible distress of his mind, agreed with the Doctor, and the lieutenant nodded his head to show his understanding of what was required from him and his men.

The Doctor looked at the four men who were to make the desperate attempt with him, and rose swiftly to his feet.

“ Let’s go,” he said.

CHAPTER XIX

A Fight and a Rescue

The events of that night were to be etched on Hugh's memory for the rest of his life. They moved slowly and cautiously as they drew nearer to the place above the house, careful lest they stumbled over a rock or tree-stump. It took nearly half an hour for them to reach the spot from which the Doctor had reconnoitred the house. When they looked down, they saw that there was a fire blazing on the terrace, and they counted fifteen men lounging around it. One of the party was playing a mandolin and singing, but the remainder seemed to be paying little attention to the music, and were arguing loudly amongst themselves, while bottles and glasses were passing round.

"The room in which your sisters are imprisoned," the Doctor whispered to Don Carlos, "is round on the other side of the house. I had not meant to advance until all the men were asleep, but they're making such a din that I think we might as well try now. We will work quietly round to the far side; there was no sentry there last time, but we must carry on as though there is one now, so be as careful and quiet as possible."

After twenty minutes of cautious movement, they

reached the face of the rock on the summit of which the house was built. They had brought a small grapnel and rope with them from El Paso, and had muffled the steel hook in strips of cloth so as to deaden any sound. Sim threw it upwards to the crest of the rock above him, and at the second cast was lucky enough to secure a grip.

"You go up first, Lightning," the Doctor hissed. "When you get to the top, lie down and listen for a minute or two. If you are sure that all's clear, give the rope a shake, and the rest of us will follow you."

With fiercely beating heart, and holding his breath, Hugh scrambled up the rock face, slowly raised his eyes above the level of the platform, and gazed about him, with all the weight of his body straining at his arms, while he looked for the movements of a sentry. He could see nothing moving and swung himself up to lie at full length, until he was certain that the brigands were not keeping a watch upon this side of the building. A shake on the rope, and in less than two minutes the others were lying beside him, their eyes and ears astrain for any sign of the enemy.

"That light up there," whispered the Doctor, "is in the girls' room. All the windows on the ground floor are bricked up, but a couple of bricks have been left out in each one for light and ventilation. Don Carlos, you go forward with Sim, climb on his shoulders and take a look through the open space in that window ahead, and for Heavens' sake keep quiet about it;

remember there may be an enemy inside the room into which you are looking. Bill, you and I will go to the right-hand corner of the house and keep a look-out. Lightning, you move off to the left. If you hear anyone coming give a low hiss as a warning. Then everyone else will lie down as close to the wall as he can get. It's as dark as a cow's inside here, and unless he stubs a toe on us, a sentry is not likely to find us. Even if he does, he will not suspect anything but will imagine it to be one of his own gang asleep. If it gets that far, grab him, and wrap your hands round his throat so that he can't raise the alarm."

The five of them crawled away to their stations. Don Carlos mounted on Sim's shoulders and, staring through the opening mentioned by the Doctor, found himself looking into the room. It was furnished with a wooden table on which stood two lighted candles, and with two couches, upon which reclined the señoritas.

"Hush, my dears, hush for your lives!" he whispered, and as they started up in sheer terror: "It is I, Carlos. Silence for your lives!"

Swiftly Don Carlos told them of what was intended.

"You can't enter by the window, Carlos," said the elder girl; "there is a heavy iron grating behind the brickwork."

"Don't worry," he replied. "We'll file through that. You two keep on talking as loud as you can, to drown any noise we make." With that he jumped down and told Sim what had happened. Sim at once asked him

to fetch Bill Royce, and then to go and relieve Hugh at his post, and stay there while they cut through the window.

When Bill and Hugh glided to Sim's side, they found him already at work upon the bricks with his stout-bladed knife.

"They're only adobe," he said. "We'll soon cut through them."

In a very few minutes they had made a hole through the unbaked bricks. "Señoritas," said Sim, in Spanish, "place a chair against this hole and throw a blanket over it, so that if any of the brigands enter your room they won't see what we're doing."

Working in turn with their keen bowies, within half an hour they had made an opening large enough for a man to pass through. Then with well-oiled files they fell to work upon the iron grating. It took two hours of hard labour to cut through the bars, labour that had to be stopped every now and again because of some sudden alarm. To Hugh the situation was thrilling in the extreme. At any moment a blast of gunfire might come sweeping at them, or a sudden shout might bring the whole gang of brigands at the run, but at last it was done, while the noise of singing and shouting from the farther side of the building had grown louder as the bottles began to take effect upon the kidnappers. At last, as the bars parted, a sudden silence fell, and the quiet of the night descended.

"Do you think we'll get them away without a

fight?" Hugh asked the Doctor, as the little man came sidling up, after Bill had told him that the job was done.

"I doubt it. The gang have just gone in, except for two men left as sentries, and the night is very still. In you go, Don Carlos, and when you are inside move the furniture against the door to make a barricade."

The two girls had been singing hymns for some time as the best cover for their rescuers, but their presence of mind seemed to leave them as their brother entered their room. They stopped singing abruptly, and flung their arms round his neck, with little cries of joy. Instantly there was a loud knock on the door.

"Say, what's the game?" roared a voice. "I'm coming to see what's happening in there."

They heard the key turning in the door, and Carlos flung himself at the wooden panels, while Hugh scrambled madly through the broken window to join him, with the others close upon his heels. Outside, three slow, regularly spaced shots tore the stillness of the night air, and then the Doctor came tumbling through into the room, stuffing fresh cartridges into the chambers of his six-gun as he did so. Hugh, the instant he had arrived, had slipped to the door and grasped the handle in his muscular hands, preventing the man outside from turning it, while the others worked like demons to pile the furniture against it.

With a roar, the houseful of desperadoes awoke. Men were shouting and yelling, but as yet they had no

idea of what was happening, and most of them seemed to have rushed out on to the terrace to find the cause of those three shots. Bill's revolver roared twice as he fired at the men who had come rushing round the corner of the house, their figures outlined against the glow of the fire, and with each bullet a brigand dropped.

There were several attempts to turn the handle of the door, but Hugh hung on grimly while the others finished their work on the barricade. They worked as silently as possible, and they heard the oaths and shouts of several men who ran along the terrace outside the forced window. Then one voice shouted angrily for silence.

"There's no one out here," it said. "Martinez, go and fetch torches. Have you seen anything, Miguel?"

"Nothing, boss," answered another voice. "I was lying close to the door when Domingo, who was on guard at the señoritas' door, said something, and almost at once there were three shots fired out here on the terrace. I jumped up and ran out, and Martos and Juan ran over to see what was going on. Two more shots were fired, and both of them were hit."

"*Mille Demonios!*" the first speaker exclaimed. "A thousand devils! It must be some plot to snatch the girls. Let's get round and force the door of their room. Quick!" They began to move away, when there was a sudden ruddy glow, and they paused as men came up with torches. Meanwhile the five men in the room kept as quiet as church-mice.

"There's certainly no one here," said the man who had been issuing orders. "Sacre! Look, compadres, the brickwork of that window's been cut through!"

A head loomed against the starlit sky as a man was hoisted to see if there was anyone in the room, and instantly the Doctor's pistol spat fire. The man fell back, shot through the brain, while there was a stampede of feet on the terrace.

"Perez, you and Martinez take post here close to the wall," shouted the leader. "They can't see you without sticking their heads through the hole, and they can only crawl out one at a time. Kill anyone who tries it. Round to the door, men!"

"Better than I expected," said the Doctor, chuckling. "Guess we've won five minutes, anyway. Bill, stuff this cushion into the window and guard it—when the fight starts someone may try to push it aside and take us in the rear. Let its upper end rest against this chair, and if a hand comes through to try to move it, drill it at once. Don't bother about us unless we're badly pressed and call for you."

A furious onslaught started upon the door, as axes and crowbars were brought into play.

"We may as well make a start," said the Doctor. "You empty your Colt through the door, Sim, and we'll each take our turn while you're reloading. Young ladies, lie down there in the corners, where you'll be out of the line of fire; and get out of the way, Hugh, there's liable to be considerable give and take through

that door. Bullets can come in just as easy as we can send 'em out. Open her up, Sim; let her go!"

Sim stood for a second, listening to the noise of the blows delivered on the door, and then nodded his head as he came to an understanding of where each brigand was standing. Steadily, deliberately, shifting his aim rapidly, he pumped all six chambers into the wood, yells and groans telling him that several of his leaden messengers had gone home. There was a pause for two precious minutes, and then the furious battering started again, and the door began to splinter, while a number of bullets came tearing through, splattering dust from the adobe walls in a blinding shower, as they ricocheted from floor, walls and ceiling.

None of the defenders was hit, as the Doctor had them lying prone on the floor, and instantly he went into action, emptying his pistol through the panels. As soon as his gun was discharged, Hugh took up the game, to be followed by Don Carlos and Sim, by which time the Doctor had reloaded. From the furious shouts outside it was evident that considerable execution had been done.

But the door was now nearly down, and the desperate men outside, mad with rage and afraid that their prizes might be wrested from them, seemed to have no fear, and came to the attack with a determination worthy of a better cause. One of the panels was beaten in, and then the lock gave way as the piece of wood which had been jammed against it broke. Long

before this, the Doctor had extinguished the candles, and from the darkness of the room the defenders poured a stream of fire at the rectangle of light which marked the smashed door, with the figures of the brigands silhouetted against the glare of the torches.

For over ten minutes the fight raged; the stalemate was complete. Hugh loaded and fired, loaded and fired, shucking fresh cartridges from his belt-loops into the chambers of his six-gun with the greatest rapidity. He had shifted his position to give as much protection as he could to the prostrate girls, after throwing the mattress and bedding over them to act as a further shield. But the thing was hopeless; they must very soon be overwhelmed unless Don Ramon and the soldiers came promptly, for the bullets of the Mexicans, though fired at random, must sooner or later take effect.

Suddenly, with miraculous abruptness, the attack upon the door ceased, and as the five men cheered, there came a burst of firing from outside and the sounds of a desperate struggle in the courtyard. This went on for five minutes or so, and then they heard the brigands shouting for quarter as the firing ceased.

In the sudden quiet came Don Ramon's voice calling for his daughters; the furniture was pulled away from the splintered door and they were soon in his arms, almost hysterical in their joy. The success of the surprise attack was complete. Hugh, with Sim and the Doctor, stood talking to the lieutenant outside in the courtyard, while the family were left to the joy

of their reunion. Mason, the officer, was delightedly explaining how easy it had been to enter the house, as all the brigands were busily engaged around the door of the girls' room, when a door at the side flew open and a man came rushing out. They had no time to see anything, except that a six-gun shone in either hand of the running fugitive. In the gleaming torchlight Hugh started as he recognized the man who had sold Prince to him at M'Kinney, the murderer of Don Ramon's son, and the chief of the brigands who had carried out the kidnapping of his daughters.

"Hoist 'em," snarled the desperado, menacing them with his guns. "Up with your hands. The first man to go for his gun dies in his tracks. I'm getting out, and I'll kill any man who tries to stop me!"

Both Sim and the Doctor whirled, making no move to obey, their hands streaking to their hip pockets, for neither wore the cowboy holster. Instantly the guns in each fist of the outlaw flamed. With a curse Sim wrung his hand, the Doctor staggered back and fell limply, whilst the ruffian, with bared teeth, turned snarlingly on Hugh and the lieutenant, death gleaming redly from his bloodshot eyes.

"Anyone else want to try any funny business?" he grated. "Ah, would you?" He whirled, both guns aflame, as Hugh's hand moved like chain-lightning towards the heavy butt of the Colt hanging in his holster.

CHAPTER XX

The Avenger

Only the fact that the ruffian was turning so rapidly saved Hugh, for the man was partly off his balance. A sudden searing pain in his left shoulder told the lad that he was hit. Never did Hugh more truly win his nickname of Lightning, for there seemed to be no interval of time between the moment when his hand moved and the blasting, ripping reports of the heavy gun in his hand. Beaten down by the storm of lead, the bandit collapsed, his guns falling from his nerveless hands as he dropped.

Lieutenant Mason, still dazed by the man's first appearance, for scarcely five seconds had elapsed since he first came bursting through the door, stood absolutely bewildered. Sim wringing his hand, was wild with delight.

"Bully for you, Lightning. By the Sainted Sam, I never saw such a draw in all my born days." Then his voice grew suddenly grave as he bent down and raised the Doctor tenderly. The little man smiled wanly. "He got me just above the hip," he said. "Guess I can't walk. Let me have a look at that hand of yours, Sim."

"Don't you worry, Doctor," said the big miner.

"No, let me see it," and the wounded man grasped his friend's hand. "Hum! Wish I could stand and had a proper knife here," he said. "That middle finger's got to come off. Better wrap your hand up in clean cloths and keep them wet. Make a sling and get to the doctor in El Paso as soon as you can."

While the brave little chap was making an examination of Hugh's shoulder, his own pain gripped him and he fainted clean away. Bill Royce bathed Hugh's wound, plugged it with cotton, and then bandaged it, making it as clean and comfortable as possible, until they could reach the fort and get the military doctor to extract the ball.

Sim took a look at the dead desperado. "That's Wolf Simson, all right," he said, "one of the worst bad men on the Border. You've done decent folks down here a service to-night, Lightning."

Lieutenant Mason soon afterwards set his men to work to remove a lot of loot and plunder which the brigands had accumulated on their forays, and then, as he left, he ordered the house to be fired, so that it should not be again used by outlaws. The Doctor was lifted tenderly into a wagon—together with three other bad casualties—and on a thick padding of straw covered with blankets, they started to move back towards El Paso, while some of the troopers remained behind to escort the recovered loot back to where it might be returned to its owners.

They arrived safely at the fort, where Hugh and

the Doctor were at once placed in hospital. The wound in Hugh's shoulder had become highly inflamed owing to the discomfort of the journey and the time that had elapsed, while Sim's arm was in a frightful state. There they lay in three beds, Sim, Hugh, and the Doctor, whose wound was pronounced to be extremely dangerous. The bullet was taken from Hugh's shoulder, Sim's middle finger was amputated, and after the lapse of a month all risk of blood-poisoning was over. They were now rated as fit to leave the hospital, but the Doctor seemed to be making no progress at all. Don Ramon and his family had called almost daily on the three patients, doing everything to make them as comfortable as possible, and they were very disturbed to see how badly the Doctor was faring.

Sim, Bill and Hugh lived in luxury at the hacienda, despite the protests of the first two, who wanted to avoid going there, saying that they preferred to stay in the hotel. They were carried to the big house almost by force—and enjoyed it. Every day they were taken in the carriage to see the Doctor, who lay quiet and silent, incapable of making any effort whatsoever.

“What he wants is something to snaffle his interest,” said Sim. “He's got it into his mind that it'd be very pleasant to snuff out, and that's just about what he's going to do unless we do something to rouse him. Can't you cheer him up, Lightning? We'll lose him if you don't.”

“Do you know his history, Sim?” Hugh asked.

"I do," said Sim shortly. "Maybe he'll tell it to you some day."

"I'm sorry, Sim," replied Hugh. "I didn't mean to be poking my nose into other people's business."

"That's all right, lad," Sim said. "But he don't talk about it, and, of course, I won't."

The Doctor smiled faintly as Hugh sat down beside his bed and asked him how he was getting on.

"I am getting on, lad," he was answered. "I reckon that I shall arrive there before long."

Hugh pretended to misunderstand him.

"You've got to pick up strength," he said breezily, "or we shall never start upon that mining expedition into the Apache country, you know."

"If you hang round waiting for me to get strong enough for that, I guess you'll wait a mighty long time," the Doctor answered, with the faintest of smiles.

"I hope not," said Hugh cheerfully. "By the way, Sim," he went on, looking at the big miner on the far side of the bed; "you once told me that you'd tell me some of your adventures when you were mining in California. I'm interested, because my uncle was out there for ten years. I wonder if you met him in any of the camps?"

"Why, Lightning, there was a whole heap of men out in California," Sim answered with a grin. "What might your uncle's name be?"

"Will Tunstall," Hugh replied, and sat back amazed to see the effect the name had upon his two listeners,

the pale little man in the bed and the grizzled giant opposite to him. They simply gasped.

"Was Will Tunstall your uncle?" Sim gasped. "Waal, if that don't lick creation! Here we've been all this time together, and never suspected it. Is your name Tunstall, too?"

Hugh said that it was.

The Doctor's eyes were fixed upon him. "Yes, you are very like him, lad," he said quietly. "I thought that you reminded me of someone, and now I know. It was English Bill. He was just as tall and straight as you are, and you've got his talk and laugh. I wonder that we didn't notice it at once, Sim."

Hugh was now even more surprised than the two miners had been. It seemed strange that he should have met these mates of his uncle. Stranger still that two such fine fellows should have so much affection for a rascally fellow like Uncle Will. But he could not get over the remark of the Doctor, that he looked like his uncle.

"Well," he said, "I had no idea that I looked like Uncle. I think you must have forgotten his figure. He is certainly tall and muscular, but he's much darker than I am."

The Doctor and Sim were looking at each other in astonishment.

"Are you trying to say that your uncle's still alive?" Sim demanded.

"Of course I say so," Hugh answered in surprise.

"Well, then, it ain't the same man. Our Bill Tunstall was killed, murdered, ten years ago. Odd though, Tunstall isn't a common name, at least not in these parts."

"Is yours a common name in England, Hugh?" the Doctor asked.

"I don't think so. I have never met any others. We come from Cumberland, in the north of England."

"So did English Bill," said Sim. "But he must have come out here before you were born, though we didn't know him until he'd been several years in America."

"My uncle also came out here before I was born," Hugh remarked; "but I have never heard of another Tunstall having done so. However, the man you knew couldn't have been my uncle, for he's still alive, so far as I know."

"Lift me up in bed, Sim," said the Doctor suddenly. "Say, Hugh," when this had been done, "when did this uncle of yours return home?"

"About six years ago," Hugh replied, surprised at the strange excitement of the little man, who, ten minutes before, had seemed to have no interest in anything at all.

"Six years ago! Sim, d'you hear that? Hugh says six years ago."

"Gently, Doctor, gently," soothed Sim, alarmed by the tense excitement on the little man's face. "What does it matter when Hugh's uncle returned to England?"

The Doctor paid no attention to him, but went on speaking to Hugh. "And he had been away a great many years? Went away as a boy and was so changed when he returned that no one would recognize him?"

"Yes. That was so," Hugh agreed, becoming more and more surprised.

"Was there any reason for his coming home?" the Doctor went on.

"Yes, my father had died, and he came in for considerable property and was to be one of my guardians."

"D'you hear that, Sim?" the Doctor called out in a shrill voice that was almost a scream. "Describe this uncle of yours, lad. Let us have some idea of what he looks like."

As well as he could, Hugh described his uncle, and saw the two miners look significantly at each other.

"Is Hugh like English Bill or not?" the Doctor asked suddenly.

"He certainly is," Sim agreed. "Hugh's a bit taller than Bill was, and his figure's looser nor his, but he'll broaden out until he'll be just what Bill was like."

"Can't you see that his uncle was our mate, Sim?"

Sim was silent, but Hugh broke in: "I don't understand what you're driving at, Doctor. You say that the Tunstall you knew was murdered, and my uncle is alive and well in England; or he was when I last heard about him, a couple of years ago."

"Why was our Bill Tunstall going home when he was murdered, Sim?" the Doctor asked quietly.

"Because his brother was dead and had left him an estate. Not that Bill wanted it, but he'd been asked to act as guardian to his nephew," answered Sim slowly.

"And he never went, did he?" said the Doctor.

"He never went," agreed Sim solemnly. "He was buried instead."

"But someone went," said the Doctor. "We know that from what Hugh just told us—the man who murdered him and stole his papers."

"By thunder!" shouted Sim, "but you're right, Doctor. You remember we could never tell why English Bill had been killed. His money was still on him, but it wasn't enough to tempt his slayer. I see it all now. It was the papers he wanted, as well as to put Bill out of his way."

The Doctor smiled gently, very wearily. "Do you recognize anyone from Hugh's description, Sim?" He looked keenly at his mate, and as the big man's lips started to form a name, the Doctor nodded, stopping him with:

"I see that we both think the same. Now, lay me down and tell that doctor to get me up in a week, for you and I are going to England with Hugh. Tell the cook I want some of his strongest soup; there's no more time to waste lying here in bed."

When Hugh came out of the hospital, he turned to Sim, completely bewildered by all that had been revealed.

"Is all this true, Sim, or is the Doctor off his head with his illness?"

"It's gospel true, Lightning," answered Sim. "By the way, has this man you call your uncle in England got a light sort of walk like a cat, and a kind of tigerish way about him. Say, by the way, has he got a Mexican wife?"

Hugh said that the description of his uncle fitted him like a glove, and then went on to say how good and kind Aunt Lola had been to him. He described the fight in the drawing-room at Byrneside which had caused him to run away to America.

"I guess that our trip for the Apache gold is right off," said Sim. "The Doctor'll just naturally have to go to England now." And the big man sighed.

"But I'm hanged if I can see why he should bother about my affairs," said Hugh.

"The Doctor's one of the kindest and most sensible men in the world," Sim explained; "but when there's been some big injustice done to someone near him, he'll never rest until justice has been satisfied. That's what's got him into much trouble, and why he spends half his life recovering from bullet-wounds taken when he's settled some real bad man. Listen, this uncle of yours is a man called Symonds, who was a professional gambler way up in Cedar Gulch, the last place we were at before your real uncle, English Bill, was murdered on his way home to claim his inheritance and to take care of you. I guess I'll have to go with the Doctor,

as there will be need for a second witness to prove that he's not William Tunstall, but we may have trouble even then."

Hugh told the kindly Mexican family, his hosts, the whole of his life-story when the old Don offered him a large ranch close to the hacienda, and explained that he must go back to England and reclaim his inheritance. Don Ramon went on to say that he had given instructions that the ransom of 100,000 dollars which he had collected should be divided between Bill, Sim and the Doctor to show some little token of the gratitude he felt towards them. Hugh promised to do his best to try and persuade three very proud and haughty men to accept the gift, and after a lot of talk managed to win Bill Royce over towards taking what the Don offered. Sim at first refused violently, but at last agreed when Hugh pointed out that the Doctor was nearly sixty and he was past fifty. Hugh rode back to the hacienda to tell the Don that the gift had been accepted.

Now that the Doctor had made up his mind to live, he recovered with marvellous rapidity and in a fortnight he was ready to travel. Hugh took his leave of Don Ramon and his family with the keenest regret. Prince went back to his old stable, for they were to travel down the Rio Grande by boat, and Hugh's parting from the beautiful roan was even more heart-breaking than it had been from the kind family.

From Matmoras, at the mouth of the Rio Grande,

they went on by coasting-steamer to Galveston, and thence by a larger steamer to New York. There Bill Royce left them, to travel home to his own village, where he intended to settle, and the remaining three crossed to Liverpool in a Cunarder. The quiet and the sea-voyage quite restored the Doctor, and by the time they entered the Mersey he was his old self again.

Hugh wrote to Mr. Randolph, his solicitor, telling him that he had most important news to communicate, and asking to be met at Kendal rather than Carlisle, as he did not wish to be seen or recognized. Two days later he introduced Sim and the Doctor to the old lawyer, and immediately told him why they had come to England. When the Doctor and Sim had each given their story in the private sitting-room which the lawyer had booked at the hotel, the old man sat back in amazement. After a pause he spoke slowly.

"There can be little doubt," he said, "that Symonds murdered your late uncle, William Tunstall, but the difficulty is that we can do nothing about that in this country. The crime was committed in America, and the man would have to be arrested and then extradited by the United States to stand his trial in California, and I doubt if they will go to all that trouble and expense."

"Is he to escape scot-free?" demanded Hugh.

"Not by any means," soothed Mr. Randolph. "Not by any means. Though we cannot do much in the matter of the murder, we *can* move in the matter of

his impersonating your dead uncle. The evidence of these two gentlemen, and the sworn deposition that we can easily obtain from Sacramento, as to William Tunstall's death and burial, will be enough to prove to our British courts that he is an impostor, and he will receive a sentence of at least fourteen years, and at his age that will mean that he will never be free again. I think that will be the best way out of our difficulty, and will certainly ensure that justice will be done upon him."

Sim and the Doctor agreed. Late that evening the whole party went to Carlisle, and the following morning obtained from the county magistrates a warrant for Symond's arrest. With two constables, Mr. Randolph, Sim, the Doctor and Hugh started off in hired vehicles for Byrneside. On arrival, Mr. Randolph said to the servant who opened the door:

"Announce me to Mr. Tunstall, and don't mention that I am not alone."

Following the solicitor closely, the whole party went across the hall, and, as Mr. Randolph entered the drawing-room, the others burst in at his heels. The man was standing on the hearthrug, while his wife was seated, looking flushed and excited. They were evidently in the middle of a quarrel. The man looked up in angry surprise at seeing so many men rushing in.

"John Symonds," barked one of the constables, "I arrest you under a warrant on the charges of impersonation and of fraud."

A deep Mexican oath burst from Symond's lips. He spat one word in that language, and in a flash a pistol filled his hand and streamed fire. "You too, you miserable puppy," he snarled, and threw up his hand for another shot, aiming at Hugh, but a six-gun roared, and Symonds, before he could pull his trigger, crashed to the carpet, shot through the brain.

The Doctor stood with a smoking pistol in his hand, looking down at poor Lola, shot dead by the villain's first bullet. "I oughtn't to have waited," he said sadly. "I heard the word he used before he started his draw. 'Traitor' is what he called her, and I should have known what would follow. Maybe it's all for the best, as she would have been arrested and punished as his accomplice. Dead, she is safe from all further trouble."

The news of what had happened at Byrneside created, as may be imagined, tremendous excitement, to which the revelations made at the inquest greatly added. The result of the very thorough investigations which took place was that a verdict of wilful murder was brought against the deceased John Symonds, while the Doctor was exonerated for shooting the man. In view of the circumstances, this was regarded as a clear case of self-defence.

CHAPTER XXI

And Last

What happened to everyone?

Well, Hugh settled down at Byrneside, eventually married one of Luscombe's sisters, and became one of the best-known landowners in Cumberland.

Sim and the Doctor, with the money given them by Don Ramon, and the rewards for the death or capture of the outlaws who had been killed during the rescue of the señoritas, bought a small estate in California, and settled down on it, to spend their days in comfort.

Bill Royce, as we know, was already settled, and that seems to account for everyone. By the way, Hugh did hear once more of Bronco Harry. That worthy cowboy married one of the girls he rescued from the Indians, settled down, and later on became one of the biggest cattle-barons on the Western Plains.

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